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July 15, 1884.

Vol. XIV.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 364.

SNAP-SHOT, THE BOY RANGER; or THE SNAKE AND THE DOVE.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," "GIANT GEORGE," ETC., ETC.



ALMOST ON THE INSTANT HIS BOWIE BLADE WAS BURIED, BUCK-HORN DEEP, IN THE SAVAGE BRUTE'S SHOULDER AND HEART.

Snap-Shot, THE BOY RANGER;

OR,

The Snake and the Dove.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(MAJOR SAM. S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "THE RANCH RAIDERS," "WILD WOLF," "THE FIGHTING TRIO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING FOR THE END.

A MAN of some three-score years of age lay upon his death-bed in a fine mansion, on the lower waters of the Guadalupe river.

The dwelling was large, roomy, and furnished in quite a luxurious manner, time and place considered, the dwelling being near to the bottom-timber, with gardens and orchards around it, while wide fields and a row of negro cabins, but a short distance up the line of timber, indicated that the proprietor was an extensive planter.

The room in which the invalid lay was a very pleasantly situated apartment, the windows being nearly flush with the flooring of the wide veranda, and now open, allowing the cool breeze from the Gulf to fan the pale cheeks of the sufferer, as well as giving a lovely and extended view.

It is the evening hour as we enter, in thought, the sacred precincts of the sick-room, and it needs but a passing glance into the emaciated face that rests upon the white pillow to decide that the end is near. All that we see denotes it.

Sitting by the bedside is a maiden of great beauty, some seventeen years of age.

Large, lustrous eyes of dark brown, and a wealth of wavy, silken hair of the same hue, as are her long lashes and delicately-penciled brows; a form perfectly rounded, and a face, albeit now pale and somewhat haggard, made up a picture of youthful beauty and grace. Her high forehead indicated superior intelligence, and the arrangement of everything in the apartment proved her to be possessed of an artistic taste.

For some time the sufferer on the bed lies without sound or motion, his eyes fixed upon the face of the young girl, and he with more the appearance of a corpse than a living man. The maiden's eyes are blinded by tears, and her sorrowing thoughts are so deep that she is probably, for the time, unconscious of her surroundings.

But, quickly, she is aroused to attention and earnest solicitude, although but a slight rustling of drapery has broken the silence of the room.

Dashing the tears from her eyes, she gazes at the invalid, whose hand is now partially uplifted, one long skeleton finger being pointed toward a small table near the bed, upon which are several vials and glasses.

At once the maiden rises, her emotion too deep as yet to articulate a word, and pours some wine from a bottle; then, gently and lovingly raising the head of the sufferer, she places the tumbler to his lips; slowly raising it, to allow the strengthening liquid to be swallowed by the sick man, whose eyes brightened with a new luster, lent by the invigorating juice of the grape.

Not until the last drop had passed the thin bluish lips, did the maiden remove the glass. Then she placed it in the chair, upon which she had been seated, without lowering the head of the sufferer from her caressing support. Deftly, and without in the least disturbing the patient, she turned the pillow, placing the cooler side of the same uppermost; and gently lowered his head upon it, in a comfortable position.

"Thanks, my darling little May!"

The words were spoken in a scarce-audible whisper.

"My only regret," he continued, "is at the thought of leaving you alone in this cold and selfish world."

"Oh, papa, do not talk like that!" she exclaimed; "you must live! You shall not die, and leave me."

"May Montford!"

He called her name, in a voice of mingled reproof and appeal.

"Forgive me," said the girl; "I forgot myself. It is beyond my power, at times, to repress my emotions; and I can only, by a great

effort of will, prevent myself from shrieking out against my unjust griefs. My poor mother sleeps beneath the magnolias, and now you, dear papa, insist that the hand of death is upon you.

"Can I bear all this, and passively submit? Oh, my poor heart will break! I even question the justice of Heaven, in my great misery."

"May Montford!"

Again, the same words, in tones low and unearthly as from the tomb, reprovingly and pleadingly.

May had, while speaking, paced back and forth, across the room, wringing her small white hands, while her willowy form trembled with the intensity of her emotions; but, as her name was spoken from those lips so soon to be sealed forever by death's cold hand, she saw that she was adding, by her words and manner, to her father's dying anguish. As the thought of this came into her mind, she fell upon her knees beside the couch, buried her face in the bedclothes, and with her hands sought the emaciated fingers of her dying and only parent, which she clasped; while in a voice low, and broken by sobs, she muttered:

"Forgive me, papa! Oh, dear, kind, good papa, forgive your poor May!"

Slowly the attenuated hand quivered up and down in an attempt at a caress; as, oft in the childhood of his daughter, that self-same hand had soothed her little griefs.

This simple act seemed to increase the anguish of the young girl, in place of soothing and quieting her, and she groaned aloud.

But for the tears that came to her relief, she must have gone into spasms.

"Wine, May, wine!" gasped the invalid.

Instantly the maiden arose to her feet, and again administered the requested dose. Her thoughts were now somewhat changed, her extravagant manifestations of anguish and grief in a measure controlled through her solicitude for the sufferings of her father, so apparently manifested, or betrayed, by the sound of his voice.

Strengthened a little by the wine, the old man, after a moment's silence, spoke in a clearer voice:

"May, my poor darling, let us be calm, for I have much to say to you, and but little time, I fear, to be with you. Has my brother James arrived?"

"No, papa; not that I am aware of."

"He will be here soon, I think. I can die more contented and relieved, after I have seen him and placed you in his care."

"I regret that he has held himself aloof from us for so many years. You cannot remember him, May, as you were quite a child when he last visited us in Louisiana, previous to our removal to Texas. He was a wild and wandering character, but at his age I should suppose he must have changed."

"I have heard from him, directly, but once in many years, that being the time when he announced his marriage with a widow lady, who had a son by a previous marriage. His wife soon after died, and it was only recently that I learned, through a friend, that James and his step-son were in Galveston. More wine, May."

The girl complied with the request, and her father presently continued:

"I have been ill a long time, my darling, and hence my death has been expected. My taking off will not crush you, as if it had been sudden and unexpected. You are naturally of a strong will, for which I am truly thankful. That will help to sustain you."

"You will soon meet some one whom you will love, who will protect you as his wife; and I pray that he may be good, and true, and brave—one who will appreciate you."

"Remember my words, darling; that such a man as I have reference to, you will be more liable to meet in the middle class, than in the higher and more dissipated one in which we have moved. I regret that it has been necessary to sacrifice our home, but I have felt it to be my duty to you. It would have been impossible for you to carry on the plantation, without risk and loss."

"But you have good sense and judgment, and in one year from this time, when you will have full control of your property, I have no doubt that you will invest to your own advantage."

"Your money is in bank, subject to your orders through your uncle James; but, in the event of any dishonesty in my brother, your personal complaint and proofs will, if placed before your bankers, cause the guardianship of James Montford to cease."

"The wagons, furniture and as many of the

slaves as you wish, are at your disposal; and the same cannot be sold to advantage I would advise you to purchase a section of land west of San Antonio, stock the same, and establish a ranch, engaging some reliable person to superintend it."

"This will be, of course, after you are your own mistress. Probably James will be glad to attend to everything for you. Secure a home for yourself in a respectable part of the Alamo City, and mingle, as you should have done long since, in society."

"Don't grieve for me, dear; but be bright and happy. Some more wine, please!"

Again stimulated, the dying man extended his hand which was clasped by his daughter, who now sat staring with fixed gaze and glassy eyes; for, despite the fact that not only had her father been ill for months, but had on several occasions been thought to be dying—regardless of all this, May Montford saw and realized that, without the slightest shadow of a doubt, her father was near his end. Indeed she felt a presentiment that he would never behold another sun rise.

There was an expression in the old man's face, in his eyes and in the modulation of his voice, which May had never before heard or seen in him. These, with the words he had just spoken all pointed to the fact that Morgan Montford himself realized he was dying.

Ever a most affectionate father had he been, doubly attentive to his child since the death of her mother; and, although in a manner prepared for his demise, yet the poor girl, in her grief, fought against the conviction.

With suppressed breath she now sat by the bedside, not daring to break the awful silence which as the evening breeze died away, became death-like and almost insupportable to the intensely nervous maiden, who had been rendered doubly sensible to her emotions, and more easily moved and impressed by her thoughts, through her long vigil and continued broken rest.

But a very short time did the father and daughter remain thus, when the galloping of rapidly approaching horses became audible; and May Montford gave a start of nervous fright at the unwelcome sound, which led her to fear that those who approached would intrude upon the sacred precincts of her dying father's apartment.

An expression of relief and pleasure overspread, however, the wan face of Morgan Montford, and again he pointed to the wine.

His want was quickly supplied. Then he said:

"May, please send Uncle Bob in, to bolster me up. I am sure my brother James has arrived at last; and I am so thankful if he has, for then I can die more peaceful and resigned."

May glided noiselessly from the room, and returned with an aged negro man in her company; the tears flowing fast down the ebony cheeks of the gray-haired slave, and his countenance showing the grief he felt.

"Bress de Lor' I's hyer till yit Mar's Morgan!" said the old negro, in a feeble tone; "but I doesn't 'low I'll linger more'n long 'nough ter pray wid ole Phillis onc't er twic't arter h'istin' yer onter yer pillars fer de las' time. Yer is boun' fer de Good Place, Mar's Morgan—ole Bob knows dat!"

The old man stopped, for a strange look in the planter's eyes caused him to become silent; and he trembled, as he recalled the fact that his master had never before failed to greet him as he entered his room.

Morgan Montford was now tenderly lifted upward, and his daughter placed several pillows beneath his form, thus keeping him in a reclining position.

No sooner had this been accomplished than a gentleman entered the apartment, in a hasty but noiseless manner, hat in hand, and approached the bedside, after bowing in silence, and politely, to May Montford.

The countenance of the new-comer changed expression as he looked at the face of his patient, and he took hold of the thin wrist.

"Wine, doctor—wine!" gasped the old man.

The doctor noted the pulsation, and then gave the wine as desired.

"The hand of death is upon me, Doctor Judson," said the sufferer, in a hoarse, rattling voice, the sound of which caused poor May to tremble violently, and gaze helplessly at her father.

"I can soon dispense with your kind services. Do not deceive me. How long have I to live?"

"That is a difficult question to answer, my friend," returned the physician, evasively.

"It depends upon circumstances. A shock

might be fatal to one so reduced in strength; but as no occasion exists for such, I have reason to hope you will hold out until midnight. Only your excellent constitution has kept you up through such a siege of sufferings."

"You have been very kind and attentive, doctor, and I thank you. All that I now ask, is that you be equally so to my daughter, should she ever, in any way, require your services."

"You can rest assured that Miss Montford can command me," was the prompt reply. "But, I have to inform you, that Mr. James Montford and his step-son have arrived at the plantation. They came in my company."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the dying man. "Please escort them here at once, Doctor Judson?"

There was no need, however, for the physician to leave the apartment, for, the two men he had named entered at once, without the slightest noise having been made to herald their approach. This, to one who was not overpowered by the occasion, might have seemed suspicious, giving grounds for believing that the pair had been listening at the door.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW ON THE THRESHOLD.

THE two men, who entered the death-chamber of Morgan Montford were met by Dr. Judson, who at once, in a low and impressive tone and manner, introduced them to the daughter of the dying man.

The maiden respectfully acknowledged the introduction, but moved not from her position by the bedside, casting but a glance at each, and then fixing her gaze upon the face of her father.

The old planter, having, through the excitement consequent upon the coming of his brother, become speechless, had a stimulant given him—the new-arrivals appearing so impressed by the scene, that they stood for some moments in silence, with expressions of grief upon their faces.

The elder of the two, James Montford, was past fifty. His hair, evidently once of a raven hue, was now irongray, and although worn to the shoulders, was straight and coarse. His beard and mustache were of the same color, and were also coarse, even bristly.

His complexion was sallow, his brows beetling, and his eyes, which were small and deep-set, were black, glittering, and treacherous, wandering in their gaze, as if guilty of some criminal deed, the memory of which being ever present, might be revealed or betrayed by the gaze of an honest man.

He was of medium height, dressed in homespun, and without any display of jewelry.

The young man—Montgomery Montford, as he was called—was about twenty years of age, of robust form, sinewy, a little above the height of his step-father, and evidently a very nervous temperament, and passionate nature.

His hair, too, was worn long, but was wavy, even to kinkiness, and it, as well as his brows and thin mustache, were black as ebony, and suggested, as did his yellowish complexion, a taint of negro or Indian blood. He was clothed in a fashionable suit, for the time and place, and wore a large seal ring, a heavy watch-chain, and an enormous scarf-pin; all rather "loud," and suggestive of the sporting man.

After giving some wine to his patient, the doctor stepped back into the shadows, and fixed his keen eyes upon the strangers, by whom he had not been impressed very favorably during his ride in their company.

"Brother James, is that you?" asked the old planter, in a much enfeebled voice.

"It is I, Morgan," returned the other, in a subdued tone, as he advanced and took the hand of the dying man. "My son and I have hastened, at your request, to come to you; but I did not expect to find you so very ill. I had hoped that you were mistaken as to your condition, and that our coming might prove but a friendly visit. Such, I trust, may still be the case."

"I regret that we have seen so little of each other, in years past; but I have been forced to attend, strictly and continuously, to business, not being as well off in this world's goods as you."

A look of suspicion might just then have been noticed on the face of Dr. Judson, had one observed him closely.

The words, however, were well chosen to favorably impress the old planter toward the brother of whom he knew so little; but a keen glance would have satisfied almost any one that

James Montford was a hypocrite; that in place of being grieved at the evident approaching death of his brother, he was exultant at heart, at the thought of what so soon must happen.

Any one versed in physiognomy would have decided, on a brief inspection of their faces, that James and Montgomery Montford were a pair of designing villains, who had unexpectedly come upon an opportunity to secure a fortune, did they but play their cards skillfully.

Repulsive and repellent were the faces and the manner of both, although they strove hard to appear and act as the nature of the circumstances rendered absolutely necessary to any person who claimed to be civilized.

So near death, however, was Morgan Montford, that he failed to be disagreeably impressed by his brother's appearance, and poor May was so overcome with anguish that she heard and noted but little of what was said by her uncle.

"I thank you, James," said the old planter, in a more feeble voice even than before. "I thank your for coming to me in my dying hour."

"Here is my poor child, my daughter May! She will be left doubly orphaned when I am gone. Will you be a father to my poor lonely child?"

At these words May sunk, sobbing, into her chair.

"Most certainly, Morgan, I will do all in my power to console and befriend my niece," returned James Montford; "and my son, I know, will second me in this. We feel the deepest sympathy for her, and I shall grieve for you, notwithstanding we have been almost as strangers in the past."

"Bless—bless you, James! May, darling, kiss—kiss papa. God guard—my—May—"

A piercing cry came from the poor girl, who did not, in her paroxysm of weeping, realize that her loved father was speaking his farewell words, until just at the last, when she sunk senseless, with his cold lips pressed to hers.

Dr. Judson rushed to the bedside, clasped the unconscious maiden with one arm, and placed his unoccupied hand over the heart of his patient, almost using rudeness to prevent the accomplishment of the same purpose by James Montford.

Montgomery clutched the foot-board of the bed, and stared, horror-stricken, upon the scene, proving that he was not so debased and degraded, as well as heartless, as his step-father.

"Dead! Dead at last, you poor, patient sufferer!" muttered the doctor, with deep emotion as he supported the senseless daughter and gazed down upon the ghastly and lifeless face.

"Dead at last and at rest! Poor, poor May! You have lost the kindest and most loving parent that a daughter was ever blessed with. My poor girl, you do indeed need friends and sympathy."

Yet, as Dr. Judson thus spoke, he deigned not a glance toward the only near relative of the poor, bereaved maiden, whom he was supporting.

Had James Montford been confident that he could control the feelings which were then uppermost, he would doubtless have taken the form of his niece from the arms of the physician, as an act of duty; but he dared not trust himself, as his manner proved, he being forced to walk to the window and turn his back upon the corpse of his brother, to conceal the fiendish expression upon his repulsive face.

A stolen glance at his step-son, however, gave James much relief and satisfaction; for he reasoned that Montgomery, luckily, was so impressed by the scene, that there was no need of the latter's assuming any show of emotions to blind the doctor as to his lack of grief and sympathy.

The shriek of poor May had been heard by the negroes, and its import interpreted by them.

They now huddled in groups on the veranda, uttering their lamentations in subdued voices, all filled with grief and horror at the death of their beloved old master.

Dr. Judson assumed the direction of affairs, ordering the maid of May Montford to summon at once the old cook to assist in taking her young mistress to her chamber—he having prescribed immediate rest and sleep.

The slaves hurried to obey every command of the doctor, old Bob being ordered to remain in the room with the corpse.

Dr. Judson then banished his suspicions, as far as looks and manner went, and in a gentlemanly and hospitable way, invited James and Montgomery to the dining-room, ordering the servants to supply these gentlemen with a hot

supper, and then to show them to their chambers.

After thanking the physician for his thoughtful courtesy, the two kinsmen of the deceased volunteered to assist in any necessary duty in connection with the dead man or his daughter, but Dr. Judson, with thanks, advised them to eat and sleep after their long journey, asserting that he could attend to everything, and that he considered it his duty, as the friend and physician of the family, thus to do.

Slight were the objections offered by James and Montgomery, as to the doctor's overtaking himself; for both were only too glad to be thus relieved, and enabled to eat and sleep, although little sleep did either of them indulge in, until they had held a long conference, in which they congratulated themselves on the bright prospects ahead.

Dr. Judson, as soon as May had partially recovered consciousness, administered a sleeping draught, and the poor girl remained, through the night and far into the following day, happily unconscious of her misery and bereavement.

Under the directions of the physician, the body of Morgan Montford was prepared for the grave, and by midnight all was quiet about and within the dwelling, the fatigued negroes sinking in groups upon the floor, and falling asleep.

When all was still, Dr. Judson, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, stretched himself upon a sofa, and was soon after in the repose of deep slumber.

CHAPTER III.

THE DOVE IS SNARED.

It would occupy too much space, besides taxing too heavily the patience of the reader, to detail at length all that followed the old planter's death.

We will merely, state in brief, that which bears more particularly on the dangers that beset the orphan girl after being deprived of her loving parent.

The grief of the poor maiden was less demonstrative than the physician had anticipated. That it had been subdued by a powerful effort of will, brought to bear toward this end, through the repugnance she felt toward her uncle and his step-son—she not caring to express her emotions too openly in their presence—Dr. Judson, however, did not know.

Although the latter was confident that James and Montgomery were only there with a view of bettering their own fortunes by defrauding May, yet he had no proofs that such were their intentions and character, and, consequently, he did not deem it his duty to lessen, in the least, the confidence which the young girl might have in her uncle, through what had been said by her father.

Dr. Judson felt that Morgan Montford had no suspicion that his brother was aught but an honorable man. Had it been otherwise, the planter would not have left his daughter, and her property as well, in the care of James. The doctor, however, was not aware of the disposition Morgan had made of the bulk of May's fortune.

To sum up all in connection with the physician, he decided, upon reflection not to interfere in any way; believing it best to wait until the maiden herself became satisfied, by proofs, of her uncle's perfidy.

James Montford was her only near relative, and she most certainly now needed his services. If his purpose was to defraud his niece, he would soon show his hand; and then, it would be time enough to interfere.

Give him ample rope, and he would hang himself; but, if the doctor now betrayed suspicion, it would only warn the villains to act with deeper cunning, and probably greater success.

In regard to poor May, she found herself not only orphaned, but through the warped judgment of her dying father, burdened with two pretended friends; who were, as she was satisfied, far worse than open and avowed enemies.

From her first meeting with James and Montgomery, the young girl had not been able to overcome her suspicion and abhorrence; for she was a keen observer of character, and felt that she read their plotting in their faces.

That her father's mind had been greatly affected by his protracted illness, was evident; and yet, for all that, May felt assured he had not been without his suspicious derogatory to his brother.

Her father had also betrayed that he had not full confidence in his brother, by depositing the bulk of her fortune, in cash, with a banking house in San Antonio.

May knew well that Dr. Judson would be-

friend her in any way in his power; but, as the physician had a large family dependent upon him, and a wide circle of practice, she did not feel that it would be right to impose upon him, by betraying her suspicions; and, perhaps, by so doing, bring about a personal difficulty between the parties.

She was confident that both her uncle and Montgomery were desperate men, who would hesitate at no crime; the younger man being the tool, or under the entire control of the elder.

It was a matter of shame and grief, that such a man as May felt sure James Montford was, should be the brother of her father; and this regret and shame had not a little to do with the maiden's decision, not to reveal her suspicions to Dr. Judson.

When the will was read, May noticed—for she watched her uncle and his step-son through her veil—that both, in assumed grief, held their hands curved over their eyes; but, when the clause in regard to depositing the money realized from the sale of the plantation in the bank at San Antonio, was announced, then May observed that both men were actually trembling with baffled rage. Yet they concealed their feelings well afterward.

The disappointment, and its consequences in connection with James and Montgomery, can best be understood, by giving the conversation which passed between those worthies later on.

"Hell and furies, Monte!" exclaimed James, as they sauntered beneath the shades; "in the fiend's name, what's to be done now? I tell you, Monte, I'm mad—raging mad and dangerous!"

"It is plain now, that my pious brother, when he made his will, had but little confidence in me; much less than when he wrote me, and very much less than when we reached here."

"He became less suspicious as he neared the end, and it was a grand mistake in me to refrain from visiting him now and then. Everything would have been all right, had we arrived here a month ago."

"By St. Iago! Let me think, let me think!"

James Montford seated himself upon a log, and buried his head in his hands.

Montgomery coolly and unconcernedly ignited a cigar, and smoked with evident satisfaction.

At length, he removed it from his lips, and exclaimed, as if suddenly struck with a new and most agreeable idea:

"I have it, governor—by heavens, I have it!"

"Well, what has dawned upon you?"

"Strange, old man, that you have never mentioned the fact that Miss May is in maiden meditation, and probably fancy free. Why, it's as easy as rolling off a log. I'll marry her!"

"Hang it, Monte, you're right!" said James, springing to his feet; "you have got some wits about you, that's a fact. I'll give you credit, for once, in having a most brilliant idea."

"I have been so confoundedly set back by the unexpected developments, that I have been unable to think with any degree of reason. We have been fools, not to have thought of this before. That sets us on our feet again—hang me if it don't!"

"We could sift out a few ducats on the personal property, and by a free use of ink, and the signature of my ward, get possession of quite a sum, and then 'absquatulate' for parts unknown. But, if we can make the rifle in the marriage biz, we scoop in the whole pot, and then 'shake the calico.'"

"Dang it, Monte! We'll 'shake' on this venture. The trail is open and plain, and we'll win, dead sure! I've been afraid that cussed doctor would light down on me with advice, or stronger language; for I'm sure he's sized us to a dot."

"And how about the girl, governor?"

"There you have me, Monte; but I'm inclined to think she's no slouch. She's got too much fire and vim to suit me, but I reckon we can break her into harness. Do you know, boy, that I've come to the conclusion she don't take much stock in us, although she don't show her hand."

"She's a sly one, and you bear it in mind! We've got to play a fine game with her, and it's lucky she has no particular and greatly interested friends. You don't flatter yourself that you can gain her affections, and have a smooth *bona fide* marriage, do you, Monte?"

"She has highfalutin' notions, I can see, governor, and I'm not vain enough to think of winning her love by wasting soft words and glances, and thus make myself ridiculous."

"How, then, is the thing to be worked?"

"Did you not make a note of the fact that she seemed agreeable to the old gent's wishes

that she should establish a ranch west of San Antonio and have you run the shebang?"

"Yes; but that is to be a year hence."

"I'm well aware of the arrangement; but, can we not work things in such a manner as will cause her to decide to start the ranch biz at once? Don't you see that if we once get her to a retired spot on the border, we'll have her in our power?"

"Many things might occur to favor us. She will be forced to rely upon us when with a wagon-train; and I might get a hold upon her friendship by rescuing her or protecting her from some well-contrived danger. Her friendship might in time change to love."

"Of course I'd prefer a wife who had some little regard for me, but this is a marriage of convenience—the convenience all on our side—you and I, governor!"

"Your ideas are remarkably brilliant, Monte, and I believe you've struck the right trail. We'll plan it that way. But, I say, how will we influence her to establish a ranch before the time advised by my Christian brother?"

"Simply state that it will be a heavy expense to keep the animals and everything else in the neighborhood of San Antonio; that the land is now much cheaper than it will be a year hence and that you and I will volunteer to take the whole trouble and care of it, while she can reside in a sequestered corner of the Alamo City. It's all easy enough."

"But she might think we intended to run away with the train and negroes."

"We need not take the darkies? She can lease them out for a year, until everything is running smooth at the ranch."

"Yet there will be sufficient property in our charge to make her suspicious of our object."

"That's the very thing we are working for."

"What do you mean, Monte?"

"I really believe, governor, that will have knocked all the sense out of your head. Haven't I mentioned that we want her to go along? Consequently her suspicions come in handy. All we want is for her to entertain doubts, and strong ones at that; for, as I repeat, we are extremely anxious for her delightful company on that long and dangerous trail."

"By St. Iago, Monte, you surprise me! I'll acknowledge you're ahead this trip. We'll work the biz right through as you propose. We'll win yet, boy!"

"It will be some time, governor, before Miss May will recover from the shock of the old gent's death. It struck her deep, but she bears up well under it."

"You're right, Monte, and we must treat her in a most respectful and deferential manner. We must seek her advice in everything. If we play our cards right, her suspicions may be lulled, if not entirely dispelled."

"Let us return to the house now, and be circumspect in every act and word; for, if possible, we must work the biz without violence."

"Trust me, governor! I reckon I'm as much interested as you are. I'm satisfied, however, to start with the idea that she mistrusts our motives—a very natural feeling under the circumstances, seeing that you kept away from your lamented brother's society for years, and only came to the front when you knew he was about to kick the bucket."

In this way were matters arranged between these two villains, who plotted in this dastardly manner against the young girl, whose hospitality they were enjoying, and who was the only child of the brother of the chief conspirator—planned to defraud, and plunge into misery a fair young girl, just orphaned, while they professed to be friends of that one who so greatly stood in need of true friendship.

Time passed, and poor May Montford became stern, and justly indignant, as her suspicions were strengthened in regard to the unworthiness of her guests; and this, although the plotters strove, in every way, to banish all suspicion from the maiden's mind.

May became changed, by her great grief and bereavement, from a child-like maiden to a self-reliant woman. Her intense aversion toward her uncle and his step-son was in no way diminished by the passage of time; but she resolved to mask all evidences of her suspicions, and bear the cross which her father, in his ignorance had thrust upon her—to bear it, until such a time as the villains should betray their nefarious character and object. She felt that, although friendless, she was able to guard herself against all personal harm. But this she could not believe to be meditated.

That men existed who would betray the trust of a dying man, seemed impossible, and more

especially when it was the brother of the dead; nevertheless May Montford felt assured that her uncle intended to defraud her, to the utmost extent of his power.

Upon reflection, she decided that she would adopt her father's advice in regard to establishing a ranch; but would do so much sooner than had been suggested.

So great was her grief, that May thought it would be sacrilege to her father's memory, for her to go to San Antonio, and mingle with the world, as he had advised. Indeed she decided that a quiet life on a retired ranch, where she could have her books for companions, her horse to ride, and where she could wander among the bowers of Nature, would just suit her, in her sad and friendless condition.

She had no desire to meet and mingle with strangers, and this state of mind decided her, at the expiration of three months—the time at which she was to vacate the plantation—to, at once, freight her wagons with everything that was necessary, and including many things that were associated with her dead parents, and proceed forthwith to the most desirable grazing section of the Rio Frio.

Having become aware of the extreme stubbornness, and antagonism against his advice, James Montford had urgently advocated a settlement in the Alamo City; where, he told his niece, she could, by entering society, throw off the depression caused by the death of her father. Then, when the young girl decided adverse to his counsel, he was jubilant over the success of his strategic attempt to gain his object in the establishment of a ranch.

May agreed with her uncle, however, in regard to the leasing of the slaves for one year; but she parted reluctantly with her faithful negroes, promising them a brighter future, in her new home on the Rio Frio.

Thus was everything arranged. The train was freighted, and teamsters engaged; and May Montford, having shed the last tears over the graves of her parents, turned sadly away, but resolving to have their bodies removed, to the new home on the Rio Frio, at the earliest opportunity.

In this way, with her miscreant uncle, and his miscreant step-son, May Montford set out for the wilds of the border; little dreaming of the horrors, the terrors, and the sufferings, which awaited her—and, as little of the great happiness, the near future had also in store for her.

CHAPTER IV.

A GIRL'S WAY.

JAMES MONTFORD had, as advised by his niece, engaged the teamsters for the wagon-train; but he had not been successful in securing a guide. This, however, would not be really necessary until beyond the Rio Medina; as, between the plantation on the Guadalupe and that point, or near to the same, plainly-marked wagon-trails could be followed.

May Montford, by her beauty and amiability, won the respect and regard of all the rough teamsters, from the first; and there was not one of the number, who would not have braved death, to serve her in any way.

From the fact that James Montford had engaged them, the teamsters believed that he was the owner of the train. Indeed, both he and his step-son gave their orders in a very authoritative manner. May allowed nothing of this to escape her notice, and soon, in a way that was very flattering, in place of offensive, gave the people of the train to understand that they were in her employ.

However, there was a man among the teamsters who understood matters sufficiently to warn the others not to "kick" against the orders of James Montford—or the "Old Duffer," as they called him when he was not within hearing—when such orders did not conflict with those of the "Prairie Queen," as they had dubbed their fair employer.

James Montford had proclaimed the fact that May was his niece, and, as a matter of course, the coldness displayed by the young lady toward her uncle appeared strange to the teamsters, although no one doubted that the "Prairie Queen" had good reasons for her conduct. As to James and Montgomery, the men were unanimous in thinking them a pair of "bad eggs," who would bear watching.

All were puzzled, however, after becoming satisfied that the "Prairie Queen" was their employer and the sole owner of the train, why she allowed those two, whom she evidently disliked and distrusted, to accompany her.

It may seem strange to the reader that such

familiarity should exist between train-owners and their employees, but knowledge of a very possible common danger will always unite travelers; and even where this is not the case, the teamster, beyond his actual duties as a teamster, is the equal of any who may be connected with the train—friendship and perfect confidence being necessary to comfort and security.

The two vile conspirators had counted or believed that when May had started to travel in this way she would not only become more friendly, free and communicative with them, but would seek to be in their company.

It was natural and reasonable that they should thus conclude—so they reasoned—that she would have nothing whatever to say to the teamsters; and from the strangeness and novelty of her position, to say nothing of probable dangers from wild beasts, she being a lone female among a large party of rough men. But the pair were not only deceived but greatly astonished, for May conversed freely with the teamsters, often riding from one to another, and causing her horse to keep pace with the mules, asking information upon subjects connected with their vocation, their lives, hopes and prospects—all this causing James and Montgomery to be furious, for they realized, before being long on the trail, that there was not a man in the train who would not do anything to oblige her, even to the extent of using violence toward themselves.

Then as time passed, and the free out-door life, bracing air and exercise brought back the roses to May's cheeks, she seemed to crowd to the background her grief and to accept the situation; seemed to become more hopeful, joyous and robust each day—more free from care, and also from any concern whatever. She would ride for miles in advance of the wagons, or on side trails, refusing any offer of either her uncle or Montgomery as escorts.

Had their plotting and planning changed into a different line of operations, with a different object, as was fated to be from necessity ere long, the evident dangers which May so daringly braved, would have caused the two miscreants joy, instead of anxiety and apprehension as to her safety.

Both were soon to realize that their plot, in connection with bringing about a marriage between May and Montgomery was next to impossible to accomplish.

They had, before being on the road three days, been forced to admit to themselves that May Montford, at the plantation, in her grief and dejection, was a far different person from May Montford, on the trail.

The change of air and scene, and the excitement, had transformed the depressed maiden into the self-reliant and fearless woman; the revolver and dagger, which she wore at her waist in plain view, and the rifle she had secured to her saddle, proving to the conspirators that the force they had thought of using, if other means failed, might be attended with no little danger to themselves; especially after they noticed that May in a very short time, became quite familiar with the use of fire-arms.

Yet, as probable difficulties arose in their path, they became more determined to succeed; more furious and filled with a vengeful feeling toward the helpless girl, who stood between them and wealth.

The necessity of hiding their feelings increased the animosity of the two villains, and they were at times despondent, and at others most fiendish and dangerous in their unjust wrath and fury at being over-reached, and treated with what was little short of contempt and disdain.

But the hoped for prize, indeed, the fortune which they had sworn by all the fiends should be theirs, kept them from the open display of their indignation at the position they were forced to occupy in the train, which was most humiliating: for soon, in spite of the warnings received from the most intelligent of their number, the teamsters betrayed their loyalty and regard for May, and their aversion and contempt for her relatives. Nevertheless, the plotters were forced to grin and bear all this, or give up their scheme. But this last was not to be thought of.

Gradually, and with great tact had May Montford brought matters to the state that has been mentioned; and she would have been greatly pleased, had either Monte or her uncle made a display of the anger and hatred which, she felt assured, filled their base hearts.

The wagons had been freighted at the plantation with all necessary supplies; consequently, the train did not pass through San Antonio, but

encamped when at the Rio Medina, which was some twenty miles south of that city.

At this point May decided that the mules ought to be allowed to rest and graze for two nights and a day. This halt would be of sufficient length for one of the teamsters to start on the morning following their arrival on the Medina, and ride to San Antonio, there secure a guide, and return by the evening following. Having made her wishes known to the teamsters, upon reaching a favorable camping-place on the border of the bottom-timber, the wagons were drawn in line, the mules divested of their harness, and herded to graze, while the supper was prepared and greatly enjoyed by the hungry travelers.

Little conversation passed between May and her kinsmen, but she made known her intentions in regard to remaining for rest in the present camp. James Montford at once proposed that he and Montgomery should go to the Alamo City in search of a guide; and as May felt she would be relieved by their absence, even for a day, she thanked them, asserting her belief that they were more competent to select a suitable guide than would be one of the teamsters.

James and Monte exchanged sly glances, the latter feeling positive that the older man had an especial and important object in this visit to San Antonio.

Events, however, were about to occur which would obviate the necessity of this mission on the morrow; and not only this, but which would render both the plotters the most furious of men.

Providence ordained that May Montford should decide to indulge in a gallop down the river, and an inspection of the beauties of the timber and the clear rippling waters.

With not the slightest expectation of meeting a human being, the friendless girl was fated, on that eventful evening, not only to be brought face to face with one who would prove to be the true friend she oft had prayed for, but one who was destined to stand between her and every danger that threatened her, to the end.

And a danger, deadly and terrible, was to be the direct means of making him known to her. But to explain, and not further to anticipate.

After supper, May, as it yet lacked an hour of sunset, equipped one of her extra saddle-horses, and waving a graceful adieu with her riding-whip to the teamsters, who cheered loudly, and threw their battered sombreros in the air, she galloped slowly down along the margin of the bottom-timber.

From the fact that the maiden was beautiful and wealthy, the teamsters fairly worshiped her on account of her sociability with them, and from her treating them as men should be treated.

That she insisted upon equipping and staking out her horse, with her own hands, increased the admiration and respect of these rough but brave and noble-hearted men.

"Confound her! There she goes again," growled James Montford to Monte, but not sufficiently loud to come to other ears. "She'll come to grief before many months. We'll take some of the extra airs out of her."

"By St. Iago! I begin to hate her as bad as I do a rattler, though I don't fear her bite."

"What's in your noddle in connection with the San Antonio trip, governor? I know you have something in view bearing on our big biz."

"Out with it, old man! There's no harm in the girl's taking a gallop. Bother enough, by Heavens, without noticing such trivial matters."

"Hang me, if this ain't a beastly life! I wouldn't stand it an hour, but for the object in view. I've an infernal good notion to gallop into San Antonio to-night. My mouth waters for a drink of Heideiseick, and I long to lay a tender on a queen, against an ace."

"We'll have our baths in champagne, and lay our thousands on the queen yet, Monte, never fear. The more I'm balked, and put to trouble, the more keen and determined I get."

"I intend asking her soon, in an off-hand way, what amount she wishes to use in the purchase of land. A devil of a guardian, I am, I swear! However, I reckon I've pocketed a few ducats from the sale of loose cotton, and corn, and other stuff not transportable."

"I'll find out at French's Banking House how the land lies, and demand from them what instructions my brother forwarded them in regard to my powers, as guardian of my niece."

Monte could not repress his laughter.

James Montford's face was fiendish in its expression.

"I reckon, governor, that your very prudent brother wished only to comfort you slightly for neglecting to leave you a few thousands, or your guardianship is not a financial, but merely a personal matter—keeping your niece from wetting her feet, for instance, and carving for her especial benefit at meal times."

Monte was astounded at the exhibition of rage his words produced. James trembled, and his teeth grated with fury, while the younger man hastily put in his protest.

"Come, come, governor! That will not do. Can't you take a joke? Some of the train people may notice you. Keep cool, or you'll lose all your wits! If we two can't bluff that girl, we ought to go herding goats for a living."

"Curse her! I'll have revenge for all the worry and trouble she has caused. But, as you advise, I must keep cool."

"She's as cunning as a fox, and as sly as an Apache!"

CHAPTER V.

SNAP-SHOT, THE SCOUT.

MAY MONTFORD, after galloping perhaps half a mile from the camp, checked her horse to a walk, and guided the animal into the dense shades, gazing in admiration at the beauties of nature that surrounded her.

Often did the young girl bring her steed to a halt, for the purpose of admiring some particular effect of the vista, which was ever changing. Soon she reached a point, where the golden arrows, cast aslant through the foliage by the declining sun, created a change in the scene that was enchanting; and she gazed spell-bound, herself presenting a vision of beauty, framed in the most luxuriant and lovely of Nature's treasures.

With flushed cheeks, and lips apart in admiring wonder, her bright brown eyes revealing the pleasure that she felt—thus sat May Montford, oblivious for the time of her recent bereavement, and of the existence of those who; she had been forced to decide, intended to wrong her to the extent of their ability.

Ignorant was May of the fact that her horse stood within a few feet of the bank of the river, it being here fringed with bushes, and the vines upon the trees screening from view the vacancy in the timber, over the stream.

So earnest was her study of the river, so enchanted by the same, that she had not even heard the ripple of the waters so near her.

Neither did she detect the light sound of hoofs on the soft, damp sward, on the opposite side of the stream.

The loud flapping of the wings of a buzzard, on a huge tree to her right, drew at last not only the attention of the maiden, but caused her horse to turn its head in the direction of the sound; the animal pricking its ears forward, and snuffing the air suspiciously. But the strange scent that met the nostrils of the horse, originated not from the buzzard, but from a huge black bear; which thrust its nose through the fringe of bushes, clambering up the bank from the river, where the beast had evidently been slaking its thirst.

With a low and threatening growl, the monster crashed through the bushes, and stood, with its eyes glaring with rage, within six feet of May's horse; which instantly threw its head around, and stood trembling in every limb.

These sounds, so near to her, caused the young girl to turn also; and her lovely face became pale as death, as the terrible beast met her affrighted view. Only for a moment, however, was she thus affected. Then she jerked her revolver, and instantly fired at the bear's head; but the shot did no harm, only serving to infuriate the beast, which quickly waddled forward, reared upon its hind legs, and gave a furious growl.

May had guided her horse directly toward the river, and along a path that was lined with dense thickets, until she had halted. Consequently, she and her horse could not escape, without going nearer the bear, and turning up the path down which they had come. This, it would be almost impossible to do.

To make matters still more hopeless, the horse was so terrified, as to be incapable of flight.

May Montford at once realized that she and her steed were corraled.

However, there was but a moment for even thought. The maddened bear stepped forward, and with one powerful blow with its huge paw on the head of the horse, laid the animal dead at its feet, its neck broken!

With a cry of terror, the brave girl had still the presence of mind to avoid being pinned to the earth by her falling horse, and she sprang backward, standing erect and Diana-like, her revolver presented at the infuriated brute,

which now waddled over the horse's carcass toward her!

At that very instant, however, when death stared her in the face, May heard a terrific splashing of waters, then a crashing of bushes, and before the monster could inclose her in its terrible paws, a horseman spurred his steed from a point below where the bear had appeared, and dashed to the maiden's rescue.

Then followed a number of revolver reports, steel gleamed, and the appalled maiden beheld her daring rescuer bound from his horse upon the wounded bear, which, blood-smeared and growling fiercely, still stood beating the air with its terrible paws!

The next moment, man and beast rolled over and over, in fierce conflict, at the very feet of May Montford, who, with terror-stricken eyes, gazed at the fearful sight.

Up and down, back and forth, flashed the steel, and rolled those most unequally matched combatants. Then, to the inexpressible joy and relief of the maiden, she saw her gallant preserver bound to his feet, while the monster bear lay in the contortions of death.

Upon the first glimpse of the stranger, flying to her rescue, the heart of the maiden had gone out to him; and, as he stood before her, his handsome head bared, and he panting with the exertion of his terrible combat—the vanquished bear dying at his feet—then as the honest gaze of the noble young man met her own, when he bowed to her gracefully, she felt that the friend she had so longed for since her father's death, was before her.

Yes, before her, fresh from a most daring deed, was a man, brave, handsome, and of a graceful bearing—a nobleman of nature, who had, before even knowing who she was, risked his life to save hers.

Her whole heart and soul went out to the gallant stranger, and this feeling was mirrored in her eyes. She had met her fate, there in the bottom-timber of the Rio Medina!

Of this, May was convinced.

Never, should she live a hundred years, would she forget that face, that form, and that daring act.

Most strangely did it affect them both.

The rescuer seemed bewildered by the beauty of the maiden—dazed beyond the power of speech. And, truly, he had good grounds for being thus impressed. Strange, indeed wonderful and unaccountable it was, to meet a lone female in those wilds; and more so, one who belonged, evidently, to the higher walks of life.

Each instinctively stepped toward the other, seeming to be irresistibly drawn by some subtle and unaccountable magnetism; and, the next moment, the friendless orphan maiden sprung forward, with extended arms, and sunk upon the broad breast of her preserver, whose arms closed about her form, she crying out in heartfelt tones:

"You have saved me! May Heaven forever bless you!"

Trembling within the young man's embrace, May Montford, incapable of releasing herself, yet conscious of having been too impulsive and unmaidenly, felt her brain to be in a whirl of intoxicating emotions.

"Heaven has blessed me beyond all other men, my dear girl, in leading me here, and nerving my arm in the conflict with fierce beasts, whose death signals your safety; and, I fear, launches me upon a sea of despair.

"But I am wrong, to speak thus to you in your hour of dread excitement and nervous prostration. You passed the ordeal nobly!"

"You are a heroine, and I would slay a score of bears, with my bowie alone, to gain a thankful glance from your eye. But, I am a most selfish dolt. Please inform me whom I have the honor of addressing, and explain why it is I find you here, alone and unprotected."

The maiden raised her head, her cheeks suffused with blushes, and her lovely eyes mirroring the emotions of her guileless heart.

"My name is May Montford. I have a wagon-train, a short distance up the river. I rode down this way, merely to be alone."

"And found yourself, pretty soon, not alone," added the young man with a low laugh, that went far to lessen the reserve of the young girl.

"My name," he continued, "is Sidney Staunton, sometimes called, familiarly, 'Snap-Shot,' and I never fully appreciated, or was more thankful for being blessed with skill in fire-arms, than at this moment; for that bear would probably have got the best of me, but for the lead I planted in the only possible place to count, positioned as I was.

"It appears, then, that I shall be obliged to give up my horse to you, Miss Montford; but I

will consider it an honor, and a pleasure, to escort you to camp.

"I confess I am the most astonished man in Texas, to meet an angel here on the border. I am a scout and guide, Miss Montford, and have traveled many trails without being so agreeably astonished before.

"Shall I assist you now to my saddle? I will remove yours, however, from your dead horse, and buckle it on my own good steed. I can carry my own equipments over my shoulder.

"Most certainly it was providential, as far as you were concerned, that I arrived here as I did; but I fear I shall have cause to regret it, on my own account."

May still retained her position, gazing into the face of the scout; and, as he ended, she burst into tears.

"Great Heavens! What have I done, or said, to grieve you, Miss Montford? I am a brute, I know, but you must bear in mind that I am unaccustomed to the society of ladies, and your loveliness has almost paralyzed me."

"Your tongue is not paralyzed, at all events, Mr. Staunton," returned May, smiling through her tears. Then grasping his hand she continued:

"I believe that Heaven sent you to me, for I have longed for a friend—one kind, and true, and noble! I have no friends. My father, the last who remained, was laid in his grave but three months ago.

"You will be my friend, will you not?"

"Your friend, May? Forgive my presumption in thus addressing you, but you may call me Sidney in return. Your friend? Why, May, you make me the happiest man in the world, by those words. Your friend? I'll be your slave!"

"Yes, I'll tear up Texas, from the Gulf to the Pan-Handle, if you but say so! I'll change the rotation of the earth, if you think it will be a benefit to you!"

"Listen to me, May Montford!"—kneeling before her—"I swear that I will be a faithful friend to you, to the death, now and ever!"

"It is but a few moments since we met for the first time. I am but a simple, penniless scout; but I have dared to love you, May!"

"I have nothing to offer, but an honest and loving heart, and my good strong arm; but the future may have much in store for me, judging from the last few minutes, if I am not dreaming."

"Do not kneel to me," said the maiden; "we have been fated to meet in this way, and to belong to each other—for I—I—love you, Sidney!"

"Heaven bless you, May Montford! Am I indeed awake, or am I visiting Paradise in my dreams?"

"By the blood of Crockett, Snap-Shot, you are crazy with joy! Come, May! We will start for your camp, for the darkness approaches. I'll have everything ready in a moment."

"Your voice is heavenly music, but, May, give me a rest. Don't speak to me for the present, or I shall go raving mad with joy!"

CHAPTER VI.

RETURNING TO CAMP.

It required but a very short time for Snap-Shot to remove the saddle and bridle from the dead horse, which had been slain by one terrible blow from the fore-paw of the huge bear.

The superb dark bay half-breed horse of the scout acted as if the maiden had infatuated it, fully as much as she had its master. The animal walked to the side of May, the moment the young man turned aside, and rubbed its muzzle against the fair girl's shoulder, as if desirous of her notice and regard.

Never, to any extent, had May Montford been in the society of gentlemen who were near her own age; and certainly never previous to this most romantic and startling adventure, had she seen a young man so winning in appearance and manners, and of such daring bravery.

Snap Shot was one to attract the attention, and create admiration, if not a stronger feeling, in any young female's heart.

May had been bereaved most sadly, and no one was more friendless and alone in the world; she therefore believed, indeed she felt assured that her good angel had raised up for her a friend at a most providential time.

Alone as she felt herself, and craving that friendship and affection, natural to her sex and age—not having had for years the benefit of a mother's counsels—it was not strange, everything considered, that May Montford was impetuous, as was her nature, and that she betrayed without reserve the emotions of her heart.

It had been a new experience for her, to, in the slightest degree, conceal her feelings toward her uncle and his step-son; for she had been ever

open and free in expressing her thoughts to her father and his friends, and now, when free from the presence of the two conspirators, she relapsed into her own natural self, thus gaining the respect and regard of the people of the wagon-train.

May had, on the impulse of the moment, in her great gratitude for her deliverance from danger, expressed herself freely. She had then betrayed the feelings that ruled her, without for an instant entertaining the idea that she was acting in an unmaidenly manner.

The young scout, on the other hand, had at the first glance he gave into her expressive eyes, realized that he had met his fate—that before him, and owing her life to him, was an angelic maiden who, did she choose, could make him the happiest of men. And when, in her impulsive manner, May betrayed her true and guileless feelings, Sidney Staunton was almost beside himself in his great happiness.

Free and open himself, carrying his heart in his face, and a mind without deceit upon his tongue's end, he did not think it strange that this young girl, in so free a manner, had expressed an affection for him. The act was not, in his eyes, the least unmaidenly.

A less brave and noble-minded man might have taken advantage of such a betrayal of feelings, supposing such a man had the power to call forth such expressions from a maiden like May Montford, which is doubtful.

The scout stood, for the first time in his life, in the presence of one, who he at once felt, would be always present in his mind, though he might never meet her again.

The young girl, too, stood in like manner in the presence of a man to whom her whole heart and soul went out; one whom she felt she would be ever happy with, and ever miserable without.

In much the same manner, have many a youthful pair been together, who ever after have walked life's path in company.

Two beings, happier than this strangely met pair, could not be imagined; yet neither of them was so constituted as to remain long bewildered by any peculiar situation, agreeable or disagreeable, and Snap-Shot at once made ready to leave the spot, although he knew not but that he was lessening the time in which he was to enjoy the society of May Montford, by so doing.

Quickly he cut the claws from the paws of the bear, and thrust them into his pouch to keep as mementoes of the event of all events, for so the young scout considered it, in his somewhat eventful life.

His thoughts were now on a wild stampede.

Had he met this beautiful girl, only to love, adore her, and then be parted from her forever?

He felt sure that she was the daughter of some wealthy planter, but it was evident she had seen little of the world. She was a jewel beyond price, and certainly was not for such as him.

It was preposterous for him to think of possessing such an angel, even though he had won her love.

Her guardian would probably offer to reward him for saving her life, thus grossly insulting him.

It was thus that such affairs generally ended. His happy dream was but a fitting one.

Calmed and cooled by the duties in which he was engaged, the mind of Snap-Shot became greatly oppressed by thus reasoning, and by the decisions he was forced to arrive at. But when he looked again at May Montford, in all her glorious beauty, the scout threw to the four winds all these gloomy forebodings and strode forward, mentally vowing that such a treasure, even were he unworthy, should never be possessed by another.

And with a winning smile May advanced to meet her preserver, the horse following her.

Not a word was spoken by either; indeed, to each, the breaking of the silence, as eye met eye, would have seemed sacrilege to the love expressed by glance more plainly, poetically and truly, than in the power of words.

Sidney Staunton clasped each fair extended hand in his brown ones, and then lifted them to his lips as gracefully and politely as any courtier of the ancient days of knight-errantry.

Without a word he then placed the maiden upon the saddle, threw his own equipments over his shoulder and walked beside his noble steed that tossed its head and kept gazing at times backward as if amazed, rejoiced and proud, at the startling changes of the last hour.

Thus on along the paths through the dark shades went the strangely-met pair, he looking

ward, his heart too full of bewilderment and happiness to utter a word, and she gazing downward, the same emotions ruling her. Soon they broke from the timber, each having been thrilled to the heart, and in every fiber of their being, by the mere magnetism of clasping each other's hands.

At length Snap-Shot broke the entrancing silence.

"Which way now, Miss Montford?"

"Please call me May," she returned; "all my friends have called me so, but as I have seen no one whom I can consider a friend since poor papa's death, it will be most gratifying to have one who has saved me from so horrible a death call me by my Christian name. Oh, you wanted to know which way our camp is? We must go directly up the river."

"Did I understand you to say that you have recently lost your father?"

The young man detested himself for the feeling of satisfaction he had in knowing it.

"Yes; I told you, did I not, that I am motherless, and that, only three months ago, my father died."

"You did mention it, May, but I have been so bewildered by all that has happened, that your words fell only like music upon my ears. Do not smile incredulously; I am speaking the truth."

"Everything has been most bewildering," said the young girl; "but I am now striving to clear my mind sufficiently to reason upon the situation."

"I do believe, that the Fates, which in the past have been so cruel to me, are now more kindly. I believe that you are noble, true, and brave; just such a friend as I, at this and at all time to come, stand greatly in need of."

"My father sold his plantation, but a short time before his death, and deposited the proceeds in a banking-house in San Antonio. The wagons and freight, which you will soon see, are mine. I am now on my way to the Rio Frio, to establish a ranch, and a new home. Since my sad bereavement, I have felt that I could not reside in a city, and mingle in society, though my father advised me to do so."

"I have household furniture, and everything that is necessary, with me, and large quantities of provisions; twelve wagons heavily freighted, with six mules and a teamster to each."

"But now comes that portion of my story, which will, in a measure, explain to you why I am at present so friendless and desolate. My father's brother, and a step-son of his, are with me; my uncle being, at my father's request, my guardian, but with very limited powers, as I am thankful to say."

"Never, since childhood had I seen this uncle, until the very night of papa's death; but I do not regret it, for I feel assured that he and his step-son are villains, and they only came to my father's death-bed through mercenary motives."

"For many years my uncle's place of residence was unknown to papa, and after he had been ill for so long a time, and his mind was weakened, he wrote for him to come to the plantation. But, previous to this, papa had arranged his business matters."

"Now I honestly believe, that had not my uncle thought he would have the unlimited control of my property, he would not have noticed my father's letter. But, since he has begun to realize his true position, I can see that he is meditating some villainy."

"We halted on this stream, intending to stay until day after to-morrow, and allow the teamsters and mules to rest and recuperate, while a guide was engaged at San Antonio. My uncle and his step-son volunteered to go to the Alamo City in the morning to engage a guide, which I was unable to do before."

"Now you know how I am situated. Those two are plotting against me, and I cannot rid myself of their unwelcome and repulsive presence. They are my enemies, my bitter enemies, and they will be yours as well."

Snap-Shot had listened, with the most intense astonishment, and as deep relief and satisfaction; for no chain of perilous and adverse circumstances could have encompassed May Montford which would have equally enabled him to champion her, and be near her, with a more reasonable excuse for so doing.

True, it was to be deplored that the maiden's near relative was her bitter enemy, and she a friendless orphan; but these facts existed, and happily gave him grounds for battling and outwitting all who might strive to do her wrong. Thus thought and reasoned the scout, congratulating himself that the state of affairs excused him from banishing himself from her.

"I will be honest," he said, quickly, as May brought her explanations to a close, "and confess to you that, although it seems mean and contemptible to say it, I cannot conceal the pleasure it gives me to know that you are friendless, and what is more, that you have enemies who seek your ruin; for it gives me an opportunity to champion, as well as guide you to your destination."

"But it appears to me that you ought to have been advised against settling on the Rio Frio, as the Indian and Mexican marauders are much to be feared. As to that precious uncle of yours, and his hopeful step-son, I look upon such foes with contempt. We will show them that their little game, whatever it is, will avail them nothing but swift retribution for themselves. There will be little left of them after I once detect their crookedness."

"But, Sidney, we must be prudent, and not betray any undue familiarity before either them or the teamsters. Cowards are to be feared, brave men never."

"Will you relate your adventure? You will have, in some way, to account for the loss of your horse."

"We must speak of it in a way that will not cause much comment. I will introduce you, and you can explain it in your own way. Already I have shown my enemies that I defy them!"

"You are a brave, self-reliant girl, May Montford."

"You think so, do you? But you will remember, that bear was too much for me."

"But look ahead, Sidney! There is my camp—our camp!"

CHAPTER VII.

SPEAKING TOO LOUD.

To the agreeable surprise of both May and her escort, after the hearty welcome of the teamsters had been received, when the scout's cognomen was mentioned, it was recognized by several who had belonged to wagon-trains for which Snap-Shot had, in the past, acted as guide.

Both James Montford and Monte had retired, making their couch, as usual, on top of the freight in one of the wagons; they evidently intending to make an early start on the following morning. But the yells and cheers of the teamsters caused them both to crawl forward, and look in astonishment on the cause of the excitement.

There was May upon a strange horse, and in company with a strange young man, but who seemed to be known to some in the train.

Where was the horse that May had ridden from the camp?

What had occurred, and who was the stranger?

Had this ride of hers been for a purpose? Did the young girl have suspicions of them to the extent of securing advice and assistance?

These were the first thoughts that came into the minds of the two men, and both became furious, especially when they saw the stranger politely assist May to dismount, then remove the equipments and stake his horse, evidently intending to encamp with the train.

They also noticed that he had carried a saddle and bridle over his shoulder.

All this was strange and not at all pleasing to the two villains, for they could perceive that this recent arrival was no ordinary man.

He had the appearance of being brave and honest.

James and Monte were tortured with anxiety.

They would have given much to know if this young man was a former acquaintance of May's and if he intended traveling with them.

All doubts in regard to this last were, however, soon set at rest, for a teamster approached the wagon, and observing the two men, called out cheerily:

"No needessity now o' yer goin' ter San Antonio, Mr. Montford, without yer hes other biz, 'sides gittin' a guide. Miss May hev 'gaged Snap-Shot, ther bestest trailer yer kin shake out."

The fury produced by this announcement was so intense that the two plotters were speechless, and before they could frame words in connection with their desire to learn something further of the matter, the teamster had disappeared.

With curses of baffled rage, both crawled back to their blankets, where they lay, conversing in low, growling tones upon this new change in affairs.

They had intended to engage as guide a man after their own base hearts, one whom they could control and depend upon in any emer-

gency. He must be unscrupulous and willing to commit any crime for money. But as in all else thus far, they had been frustrated in their purpose, and that by the maiden whom they sought to wrong.

They decided that they must be more shy and circumspect than previously, and resolved to ascertain everything in connection with May's trip and adventure down the river.

They no longer cared to go to San Antonio. They must keep with the train and keep their eyes open.

This guide might be an old friend of May's or of her father's, and the girl might have become suspicious of them and confided in this stranger. He might, therefore, give them the slip if they went to San Antonio in the morning.

It might be an arranged plan to that end.

May had probably not intended that the teamster should tell them of this new arrangement. Her intention might be to start the train as soon as they left for the Alamo City. Plotters themselves, they were suspicious of counterplots in others.

To the young girl the scout meanwhile explained that he had been on his way to San Antonio, when he so providentially rode into the river to allow his horse to drink, thus discovering the bear crawling up the opposite bank, which led to the happy rescue and meeting which have been described.

The night passed, and the day following the young scout was introduced to James and Montgomery Montford in the most commonplace manner, as the new guide, May leaving the explanation in regard to the killing of her horse by the bear to the scout. The latter treated the two miscreants in as courteous and gentlemanly a manner as the situation, he thought, called for.

The day was spent in repairing harness, the mules being herded in a favorable place—Snap-Shot, in the afternoon, taking one of the teamsters with him on a short hunt. May accompanied the guide, later, in an inspection of all the wagons and other appointments, and sought his advice quite often; but each studiously avoided betraying any undue familiarity.

The conspirators watched the youthful pair with suspicious eyes, knowing that the scout must have gained the kind consideration and regard of the maiden by having saved her life.

On the second morning, bright and early, the long line of wagons forded the river, and proceeded toward the San Miguel; Snap-Shot in the lead, some distance ahead, May having insisted, contrary to his advice, though certainly not to his wishes, on riding in his company.

Thus this strangely-met pair were enabled to pass a thousand and one flattering remarks, exchange confidences, and learn much of each other. All of this was managed, without giving any grounds for others to suspect their relations toward each other, except by their riding in company, which no one in the train thought in the least unnatural except James and Monte. These worthies rode in the rear of the train, secure from being overheard by the teamster who drove the last of the wagons, and still conferring, plotting and planning to accomplish their villainous ends; more determined than ever not to be balked, since the advent of the guide, and resolving to have his life if opportunity offered.

The associating of May Montford with the young scout, when they considered that she had never, since starting from the plantation, rode ten paces in their company, caused the two villains the greatest rage, and increased their hatred and longing for the carrying out of their vile scheme. They considered this conduct on her part a direct insult to them, and one which would be understood as such by even the most ignorant of the teamsters.

Yet, as before, they were obliged to grin and bear it; although their grin was more like an expression of fiendish rage than aught else.

It must not be supposed, that after Snap-Shot understood where May Montford thought of locating lands, he did not strive to induce her to abandon her purpose, and select a less dangerous point; for he did, and with success. But the sequel will prove, the point selected, although for years exempt from raids of red or yellow marauders, was far from being a suitable or safe place for a ranch.

However, to do the scout justice, he did not apprehend danger for good reasons, and was confident that the lands bordering on the north side of the Rio Frio would in a few years command a high price; it being a fine grazing section, and remarkably free from protracted droughts.

Not forty-eight hours had passed, after the departure from the Rio Medina, before the keen

eyes of James and Monte had detected sly and meaning glances pass between May and the guide; indeed, both the latter, through their contempt for the two miscreants, became much less guarded in their conduct toward each other.

For this evidence the villains had watched, and when their suspicions were thus confirmed—indeed they had set out by believing that the relations between these young people were many times nearer and dearer than the reality—both began to see that their plot was impossible to carry out; that the scout, with such a prize in view, would defend her to the death, and not for any length of time would he remain absent from her, especially if he entertained suspicions as to their designs. And suspicious he undoubtedly was.

Snap-Shot's conferences with them, and the information he gave in connection with the proposed ranch, the purchasing of stock, and such matters, was to them a mere blind. They felt that it was done only to throw them off their guard, and it required all their power of will to prevent them from betraying their fury and hatred.

The teamsters were delighted with the guide, who also acted as wagon-master; and never were a party of men more contented and pleased than these same rough borderers, at being so kindly and considerately treated by their fair employer, the "Prairie Queen." But matters were destined not to run thus smoothly and happily for any length of time.

The young scout saw that the scheming pair had become so infuriated at his presence, and the probable frustrating by him of their villainous plans, that they could not contain themselves a much longer time; and, when starting from the noon camp on a branch of the Rio Frio, intending, when night came, to encamp on the last-named stream, the guide, after giving directions to May and the "lead" teamster, succeeded in gaining a thicket on the west side of the creek, where he secreted his horse, and awaited the passage of the train; thinking that, as was often the case, the miscreants would linger behind.

Nor was the scout mistaken; for, supposing the latter to be in his place, in the lead of the line of wagons, James and Monte sprung from their horses on the border of the timber, and waited until the train had passed some distance over the plain.

Not many yards was Snap-Shot from the covert of the two scoundrels; and, Indian-like, he stole through the undergrowth toward them, using great caution, and making no noise that would betray his presence.

He soon gained a point, from which he could easily overhear every word that was spoken by the now exasperated pair; and most certainly the scout was astonished at the baseness and contemptible character revealed by their words to each other. He was not prepared for such an extent of human depravity, even in them.

"The game's up, as far as our first plan goes, Monte. Curse the luck, and that infernal guide too! Why, it is as plain as the nose on your face that May is dead in love with the fellow; and he will baffle any attempt we may make toward carrying out our first programme. We have been humiliated, scorned, and beaten at every turn! You'll never have a chance to marry the girl, Monte—mark my words!"

"I don't expect to, governor; in fact, I don't want to. She's a devil, clear through!"

"Why, I wouldn't be hitched to her for twice the ducats the old gent left her! Besides, I hate and detest her more and more every day!"

"And you propose to give up beat, do you?"

This was said with a look of scorn and anger.

"Not by a jug-full, governor! That swab of a guide may think he's very smart and cute, as the Yanks say, but I swear we'll get ahead of him, in one way if not in another!"

"Well, what have you got to offer next?"

"Why, there's only one way left to carry out our first plan, and that is to abduct her. We can then drug her and force her into a marriage, but which I have no inclination to act as one of the principals in."

"That is anything but an easy matter to accomplish, young man."

"It does appear impracticable, governor."

"Well, what next?"

"You know without asking."

"Still, I ask you."

"You are the next heir, old man."

"Certainly I am."

"Then May Montford must die! It's the only way to work the biz, and win."

"And this scout? What will he be doing while we are playing such a game?"

"He must go first, of course. We can pick him off from cover."

"And how shall we account for their absence to the teamsters?"

"Easy enough. We'll discharge them when we reach the place she's picked to locate in. But we'll see how things work. Something may occur to favor us. It's high time our luck turned."

"I've heard the teamsters speak of Indians. It would be lucky if we got a glimpse of a few red-skins. Then a death or two in our company, on side trails, wouldn't appear so strange. See?"

"I believe I comprehend. It is a good idea. You're right, Monte; Indians would come in mighty handy now. Let's see; the reds go heavy on women's scalps, don't they?"

"I reckon they do, governor; but we must remember that the painted howlers corral all the hair that comes in their way, and our heads are liable to be skinned with the rest."

"We've got this far, and we must run the chances. It's a big stake we're playing for, and a life or two don't amount to anything in the game. By St. Iago! if I had known the trouble, danger and worry between us and Morgan's ducats, and the contents of his cursed will, he'd have got a left-handed blessing from me, by way both of greeting and farewell, as he 'kicked the bucket.'"

"I'm getting to be murderously dangerous and furiously revengeful, and I'll spill blood before forty-eight hours more have passed, if I'm crossed or insulted again by that minx or the guide she has so strangely picked up."

"I only hope I may get a chance to draw bead on the son-of-a-gun, from some thicket, before we reach our destination."

Snap-Shot had, by this time, heard enough to be well informed, as to the past and future plans and intentions of the miscreants; and he crawled back, on his return to his horse, not daring to remain a longer time, lest he could not command himself. Vile and cowardly as James Montford stood confessed, Sidney Staunton did not desire to have the blood of May's uncle on his hands.

To him, it was terrible to realize that this wretch, the blood relation of such a lovely and innocent maiden, should meditate murdering her, in order that he might gain her fortune.

Snap-Shot was astounded to learn that it had been the calculation of James Montford to force May into a marriage with Monte; and then, doubtless, to murder her.

It was also astonishing that the miscreants should plan the murder of himself, and that in so cowardly a manner. But, in no way was the scout concerned in regard to the intentions of the conspirators; for he swore they should never accomplish their villainous ends.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RAID OF THE RED-MEN.

OUR next scene opens on the broad plain between the Rio Frio and the Rio San Miguel, the point of interest to us being some three miles from the serpentine line of timber which marks the course of the first mentioned river, and northerly from the same.

Afar to the west, north, and east, the view is unbroken by tree, or elevation of any kind; naught but a seemingly limitless sea of grass, which rolls in long undulating swells in the evening breeze, not unlike the ocean when its waters are somewhat quieted after a furious storm.

The intense heat of the day has slowly moderated as the sun sunk lower and lower, and the dark shades of the Rio timber are most welcome to those who have journeyed across that broad open plain beneath the full power of a semi-tropical sun.

At the point mentioned, slowly approaching the line of timber, in a quartering course, is the wagon-train of May Montford; the long line of white-tilted "prairie schooners," each drawn by six Spanish mules, enlivening the solitary vista.

The mules, although evidently much fatigued, needed not the crack of whip, the jerk of rein, or the yell of the teamster, to urge them on; for, they have either scented the cool waters of the Rio Frio, or else know by intuition that rest and refreshment await them at the dark-green shades to the south.

The course of the wagon-train indicated that there was a particular point ahead, which had been selected as the intended camping-place; otherwise they were aiming not to reach the

river, until the sun had set, thus taking advantage of all possible light, that they might travel in the cool of the evening.

This last reason was probably the correct one; for May Montford was now riding by herself, fully a mile in advance of the wagons, the train following the trail of her horse, clearly defined in the tall grass.

This sight would have seemed very strange to a West Texan.

To see a lone woman, not only acting as guide, but a mile or more ahead of the train on that wild border, indicated that the travelers must certainly be ignorant of the dangers of the locality.

It was indeed a very perilous proceeding, thus to gallop so far from those who could protect her if she was in danger; but it was apparent that the young girl wished to reach the cool shades in advance of the wagons, in order that she might herself select the most favorable place for a camp.

It was also evident that she was entirely devoid of fear and apprehension; for, although she at times glanced back in the rear of the train, a blush suffused her cheeks, and a joyous light flashed from her eyes, in place of a look of anxiety, when she perceived the distance that intervened between her and her friends. A glance in the rear of the train revealed three horsemen, two of whom rode side by side, a mile from the wagons, and the other alone—two miles, probably, from them, and three from the train.

The pair of riders were James and Montgomery Montford, and the lone rider, Snap-Shot, the scout and guide.

The latter was galloping at terrific speed, and his position indicated, as was really the fact, that he had been unable to leave the bottom-timber of the creek, where he had played the spy upon the villainous plotters previous to their galloping out upon the plain. This had forced him to remain concealed until the pair were mere dots upon the prairie, and the train had passed entirely from view.

This had occasioned the scout no little disappointment and worry of mind; for he had become aware of the venturesome character of May, and had discovered that she seemed utterly devoid of fear.

However, the young scout did not wish the two conspirators to know that he was in their rear, and that for good reasons; although he might have explained his position in a plausible manner, without leaving in the minds of the miscreants any suspicion whatever.

As matters stood, it was impossible for him to rejoin the train without being seen by James and Monte; and, reasoning that there was no danger to May—that she would remain with the wagons—he rode on in the rear of the two plotting assassins, at such a distance as to be unobserved by them, or, if observed, he knew they would not be able to recognize him.

Thus Snap-Shot continued during the, to him, long afternoon, until the sun was low in the heavens; and then he sped forward, unable any longer to control his anxiety. Then, when he reached a point where the white wagon-tilts were in view, and saw that the train had not yet headed for the timber, and that it would take until sunset for them to reach it, the young man was doubly anxious.

A sweeping glance along the timber-line, a keen inspection of the curvings in the same, and the northerly course of the stream ahead, convinced Snap-Shot that, between the train and the river, as the wagons were then headed, was a deep and dangerous "barranca"; and, as he, for an instant, detected the forms of May and her horse in the red glow of the setting sun, and perceived that she was such a distance in advance of the train, he became alarmed, and almost frantic in his self-condemnation.

At that distance from the wagons, it was only natural to suppose that May was galloping rapidly; and, as the fiery sun must not only blur her sight, and the eyes of her horse, both might ride over the barranca-bed, and be dashed to death! For the tall grass, on the west bank, blended with that on the east, as one approached the narrow chasm in the earth; and a rider, if not aware of, and watching for the "barranca," was liable to ride into the same, even when not blinded by the sun.

These reflections caused the scout to urge his horse onward at headlong speed.

No longer did he think or care for the notice of the miscreants, his horse speeding over the grassy plain like a ground-sweeping swallow.

The view was grand and sublime, nothing whatever to break the view on that vast billowy sea of grass and flowers, except the line of

white-tilted wagons and the riders in front and rear of the same—the dark timber line forming a wall to the south of living and most dense vegetation.

So impressed were James and Monte with the scene before them that they paid no attention to their rear.

The latter had assumed for the trail a semi-frontier costume, striving to ape the style and bearing of the man he most hated—Snap-Shot, the scout and guide. But the manner and appearance of Montgomery Montford, as well as the character of the young man, contrasted strongly with that of Sidney Staunton.

Above the medium bight, with broad shoulders, well-knit and sinewy frame, and panther-like in his movements—such was Snap-Shot. And, as he sped over the plain, troubled with the emotions that have been mentioned previously, man and mustang were both noble specimens of their kinds—a very formidable pair to meet as enemies, the arms of the scout being complete, of the most costly description, and highly ornamented.

Upon the silver clasp of his belt was engraved:

“SIDNEY STAUNTON,
“SNAP-SHOT,”
Guide and Scout.”

That the young man was greatly concerned in regard to May Montford being thus ahead of the train—the locality which he knew to be dangerous being now plain to him—was shown by the expression of his countenance, as well as by his terrific speed.

His keen eyes were fixed upon her distant form, while he seemed oblivious of the two plotters, or even of the wagon-train; for, before reaching the near vicinity of James and Monte, he guided his horse diagonally toward the timber, to gain a clearer and less obstructed view of the young girl, free from the wagons and the riders.

But a short distance, however, after this movement, had Snap-Shot galloped, when he beheld, clearly outlined in the fiery blaze of the setting sun, the forms of May Montford and her horse, the animal appearing to have been suddenly affrighted, as it reared high on its hind-legs and pawed the air.

The scout knew that she who was dearer to him than life was now near the “barranca,” and he at once drove spurs, striving to utter a piercing yell of warning, which, however, he well knew would not be heard by May.

Most intense was his agony of apprehension. But his very soul was to be racked in another instant; for, shooting up in front of the poor girl, as if from the earth, darted an Indian brave, mounted upon a half-wild and prancing mustang.

Snap-Shot drove spurs deep into the flanks of his noble bay, the animal, with a snort of surprise, pain, and seeming reproof, bounding still faster over the grass and flowers.

Another and another warrior shot up into view, plunging into the center of that fiery scene.

May Montford sat her affrighted steed, that now plunged madly, as if she was paralyzed by the terrible and unaccountable sight; or, as if she believed that the view before her was but a fantastic and horrible vision, conjured up in her imagination by the thoughts that now ruled her mind, and born of the dark shades to her left, which might, for aught she knew, be swarming with painted savages.

A score of these feather-bedizened braves were now upon the plain, one at the heels of another, and riding with great velocity; their quirts flying in the air, and their mustangs bounding toward their intended captive; the evening air being rent, at the same time, with most unearthly and terrible war-whoops.

The braves spread out, in the manner and form assumed by wild geese when migrating, aiming to surround the fair equestrian; and their object was accomplished, for, so sudden and totally unexpected had been the coming of the hideous horde, who might, with almost equal grounds have been expected to bound from the blazing sun, that May Montford was unable to throw off her terror and amazement.

It was indeed a transformation, calculated to bring to the front all the superstitious fear and horror, which lie dormant, to a greater or less degree, in even people of education and intelligence.

But, as the war-painted demons, with terrific yells of exultation, surrounded her, May jerked her revolver, and instantly fired the weapon; the muzzle of it being almost against the breast

of the burly brave, who, with a horrible death-yell, threw his arms wildly in the air, and sunk backward upon the green prairie sward.

The dead warrior was quickly clutched by two of his comrades, who grasped each an arm, while they urged their mustangs from the vicinity; two others gripping the arms of the horrified maiden, and a third the bridle-rein of her horse.

The next moment, the yelling red fiends galloped headlong toward the dark shades of the Rio Frio; the poor captive in their midst, her pale face raised toward the heavens, as if in supplications!

It was a terrible scene; all that has been recorded occurring in a few flitting moments, and being witnessed throughout by every member of the wagon-train in the distance.

The teamsters filled the air with their vengeful yells; all frantic at beholding the capture of their fair employer, their much loved “Prairie Queen.”

James and Monte were, at first, most terribly frightened and appalled; but, as the Indians dashed toward the timber, as if they feared the people of the train, both men gazed into each other's faces in unmistakable triumph. Exultation, relief, and joy, were manifest, as the elder of the two cried out:

“By St. Inigo, Monte! Luck has changed hands. Our wish has come to pass. It works bravely!”

As Snap-Shot saw the first of the savages upon the plain, he at once knew there was no hope.

He knew that the “barranca” was at that point, and that it could not be detected until a rider was directly upon the bank.

This explained the sudden appearance of the Indians.

In the “barranca,” not being strong enough in numbers to attack the wagon-train, the red fiends had lain in wait for the lone female rider.

Thus the young scout reasoned, as he sped forward; spurring on at every bound, and fairly flying over the prairie; but, as the Indians now dashed toward the timber, and he knew they would reach the same before he could gallop more than half the distance between them, Snap-Shot cried out, in an agony of anguish, his handsome face as pallid as that of a corpse, and drawn with dread concern and apprehension:

“God help you, May Montford!
“Curse the Fates that kept me in the rear!
Curse the miscreant plotters! But I will save her. I swear it, by all my hopes of happiness here and hereafter!
“Neither shall those red fiends murder her!
“No, nor white fiends compass her ruin!
“I, Sidney Staunton, dedicate my life to you, May darling, and will serve you to the death!”

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEXT MOVE OF THE MISCREANTS.

IN their excitement and concern at beholding their revered young employer in the midst of the horde of savages, and being hurried from their view, the teamsters lashed their mules into a headlong gallop, rattling the heavily freighted wagons over the plain at a frightful speed. This was simply foolish; but the brave fellows were so anguished at the thought of the doom that probably awaited the maiden in whom they felt such a deep interest, that they thought of naught else.

Quite as loudly and vengefully did the infuriated teamsters yell, as did the savages; and the hitherto peaceful and silent prairie scene became transformed most strangely. The horde of whooping warriors fled toward the timber, the yelling teamsters cracking their blacksnakes whips like a fusillade of revolver shots, the mad, galloping mules speeding toward the Indians at an angle from their former course, and the scout dashing over the plain—James and Monte following—all this made up a strange and exciting picture.

A peculiar and most piercing yell broke from the young scout at this time, which cut through all other sounds; and as the teamsters, who had not previously discovered the approach of Snap-Shot, and were greatly worried in regard to his absence at such a critical time, now gazed in the direction of the sound, and saw him gesticulating wildly to them, each brought his mules to a halt, and sprung to the earth from their saddles.

Not until then did they realize their foolishness, in thus proceeding in chase with their wagons; indeed they had, like a flock of sheep, acted as the “lead” teamster had done—more with a view of gaining the edge of the timber

than aught else, and then rushing on foot after the Indians.

The scout did not ride direct to the wagons, aiming to pass the train at such a distance as to be heard by the teamsters.

Then he yelled, at the top of his lungs:
“Unhitch your saddle-mules and follow me! On to the rescue of the Prairie Queen!”

A wild cheer burst from every throat at his command, and it was surprising to see the alacrity with which the order was obeyed.

Snap-Shot did not slacken the speed of his horse one iota, as he thus yelled. He then swerved to the south, and in less time than it takes to narrate it, the twelve teamsters were speeding after the scout, upon the saddle-mules; and lashing the animals, at every bound, with their torturing whips.

Had not the remaining mules been so fatigued they would without doubt have stampeded in harness; but, to prevent any damage to the wagons should this occur, the teamsters had disengaged the traces of the remaining “wheeler,” and cast off the chains and straps from the wagon-poles.

Thus the wagons were left each pointed toward the river, in a row; and the mules, after gazing a moment in wonder at the chase, proceeded to tear up the rank grass from the sod, regardless of the iron bits that were between their jaws.

To describe the astonishment, fury, and suspicion, that stamped the faces of the two vile schemers, when they discovered Snap-Shot galloping in their rear, would be impossible; each believing that the scout had lingered behind for the express purpose of acting the spy upon them.

Had he overheard their words, in the thicket? This was the first question that occupied the minds of both. They were speechless, in their fear and rage.

Even the fact that May Montford was now probably removed from their path forever, or would be shortly, thus leaving them masters of the situation and her fortune, was for the moment entirely forgotten.

The death of this young scout, Sidney Staunton, was now imperatively demanded to secure their safety.

They could enjoy no peace of mind as long as he lived; believing, as they now did that he knew their plans and character, and would, did they not put him out of their way, kill them through revenge if May Montford became a victim to the savages, which seemed probable.

But Snap-Shot did not even look toward them.

Under any other circumstances it would have been only reasonable to suppose that he would immediately call upon them to assist in rescuing May.

From his utter repudiation of their presence, and his wild outcry to the teamsters, it seemed proof positive to the villains that the scout had overheard their words, and scorned to speak to or notice them, much less call upon them for aid.

When the teamsters proceeded to unhitch the mules, James Montford yelled to his step-son in his insane fury.

“This has gone far enough, Monte! We have an interest in this train, and that urstart scout shall know it. I bet my life he has heard everything!”

“He is a spy! It is war to the knife now between us. The girl is doomed, and we hold the winning cards. Come on, and stop those teamsters. They shall not leave the wagons. On, I say!”

“Luck has changed to our own side, and we’ll win. I say it—I swear it—war to the knife!”

“Hold on, governor! You’re getting too brash. You’ll ruin the whole biz!”

But all that Monte could say was unavailing, or else unheard; for James Montford, jabbing his spurs furiously, at the same time jerking his revolver, bounded toward the wagons, with the intention of countermanding the order of the scout, and preventing the abandonment of the wagons by the teamsters.

But, luckily no doubt for his own safety, he did not reach the rearmost wagon until the teamster was speeding away, as were all his comrades, toward the river bottom; none paying the slightest notice to the frantic yells of James Montford, who now fairly foamed at the mouth in his fury. He would undoubtedly have fired a fusillade from his revolver, had not Monte galloped quickly to his side, and clutched the weapon, at the same time crying out:

“Are you mad, governor? What in the devil has unbalanced your brain to this extent? Why,

old man, if you had fired a shot, they would have made it hot for you, and don't you forget it.

"If those fellows heard and understood your words, you've 'dished' the whole biz—hang me if you haven't! They'll run us out of the train, and the country, too, if we don't show a disposition to rescue the girl.

"Listen to reason, can't you, and then act with reason! Hang it, man, Snap-Shot ain't the chap to allow them reds to get away with May!

"There is no doubt that he fairly worships the girl, and I'm sure I've no objections, provided we can finger the ducats—"

"Which we never will, as long as either of them live—curse them!" returned James, though calmed somewhat by the reasonable words of his step-son.

"As to pursuing those red devils, count me out. It would be madness to leave the wagons unguarded, and besides, we should get lost in those dark woods, or perhaps captured ourselves. What the deuce do you and I know about hunting Indians?"

"I know as much about it as I care to, governor, and, between you and me, I am inclined to think we'll be hunted by the howling fiends before we get through with this biz. I'm heartily sick of it, and only wish I was back safe in the Island City!"

"I don't lose my grip on Morgan's ducats quite so easily, Monte; and now that I am less excited, I feel relieved and sure of the game.

"There! Look, Monte, look! The Indians have disappeared in the timber, and the scout, who is far ahead of the teamsters, is fully a mile from the river bottom. I tell you again, May Montford is doomed, and the fortune is mine, as sure as fate!"

"I admit, governor, that the girl is in a tight fix; but she is a beauty, and the reds will probably convey her to their village. This will give that infernal scout a chance to follow their trail and rescue her.

"I understand, from the teamsters, that he has been for years a perfect terror, as an Indian-fighter; and now he has a stronger incentive than ever to carry out his ruling passion.

"He'll not consider his life, or any odds, where May is concerned. I'm satisfied of that."

"And," returned James, dubiously, "I should say we are in a tight fix also. There are only us two left to guard the train, and the mules still in harness, while we are at least two miles from water. Besides, if we go after it, we stand a chance of getting scalped."

"I'm not suffering from thirst bad enough to risk it just yet, governor; and, upon second thought, I see we are justified in remaining with the wagons. But, supposing there are more Indians in the vicinity, what then?"

"If so," was the reply, "the red devils know that the train is here, and at their mercy. They may make a dash on the wagons to-night, and then where are we?"

"If it is dark, we can evade capture by stealing away. If it is moonlight, we can see them approach, and can crawl in the grass, away from the vicinity."

"There are a good many chances against us, old man, and the ducats will not benefit us in the least, after we get a few arrows or a scalping-knife, through our vitals. I don't half like the prospect."

"It does look dubious, but we'll hang on for all that. It is as safe here as anywhere. I'm hungry, but as there is nothing to eat, we must brace ourselves with brandy."

While thus speaking, the two miscreants had dismounted and secured their horses by the neck-ropes to the wheels of the rearmost wagon, removing the bridles to allow the animals to graze. James Montford then drew a flask from his saddle-bags, which he passed to Monte, remarking:

"The way those Indians appeared, and their horrible yells were most infernal. They gave my blood a chill. In the name of wonder where did they come from?"

"Straight from the ground," answered Monte, as he wiped his lips daintily with his handkerchief, and returned the flask. "I was dumfounded at first, for I really thought the thing was supernatural, it was so much like a pantomime. But there must, of course, be a gully or hole of some kind, in the plain, where they have been lying in wait."

"It was extremely lucky for us that Miss May rode in advance, and directly upon them, or we would probably have been shot."

"Cursed unlucky, though," said James, "that the scout was not with her, as he usually is. In that case the Indians would have done a good job for us. But, I take it, they'll stand a

fair chance to corral him as it is; for he has plunged directly into the timber alone.

"See! The teamsters are quite a distance from the woods. A few moments more and we shall be monarchs of all we survey. I wish the savages would shoot every man of them, and then we'd have a soft thing of it here."

"We'd be perfectly helpless, governor! What nonsense you do get off! What could we do with the train? We would be exceeding fortunate if we reached any settlement with our two horses and our equipments. Can't you see that plain enough?"

"Why we could remove the harness from the mules, leave the animals to graze, and then ride north for help. This train is worth a large amount of money."

"I'd rather have the money, old man, than the train—yes, or even half the worth of it. You and I don't know even enough to cook our own food. We're like lost children in this fix."

"Well, we're here," returned James, taking another drink of brandy; "and we're here to stay, for some little time at least. Monte, we are the only human beings in the broad vista."

"Sure enough," assented the younger man, gazing toward the river as he spoke; "Indians, teamsters, scout, and your lovely niece, all have disappeared in the dark shades; and hang me, if I can hear a single sound, except that eternal champing of the mules, the rattle of harness, and tearing of grass!"

Both again listened intently, their eyes fixed upon the dark shades; but with the exception of the sounds that Montgomery Montford had mentioned, all was silence. Besides this, the sun had now disappeared, and only a red glow in the west remained to tell of his vanished glory.

Most impressive, under the circumstances, was the scene, and calculated to inspire awe and dread; especially as, for anything the two miscreants knew to the contrary, scores of savage foes might be crawling toward them through the tall grass.

After the startling transformation in the scene so fresh in their minds, it behooved them, as they reasoned, to be prepared for other changes, equally as sudden and threatening.

Even James Montford, although having frequent recourse to his brandy-flask, felt the depression and apprehension which the situation was calculated to occasion, and both the villains crawled up into a wagon as the darkness became deeper and more suggestive of danger.

Silence still ruled, for the mules had wandered from the neighborhood of the wagons toward the river, to slake their thirst.

CHAPTER X.

THE DUEL IN THE DARK.

THE soul-felt anguish which took possession of the young scout, when he saw May Montford carried away by the red demons into the dark shades of the Rio Frio, was almost beyond endurance. He was, in reality, almost insane at the time, or he would not have ordered the teamsters to follow him, and leave the wagon-train unguarded.

Had not his usual judgment deserted him in the excitement of the moment, he would have at once known that the teamsters, mounted upon the fatigued mules, would be of no possible use in attempting the young girl's rescue. Besides this, the train would be left unprotected, and liable to capture and destruction, while the teamsters, in the mad, undisciplined state in which they were, might themselves fall easy victims to lurking savages in the timber.

Before reaching the dark shades, the scout realized his mistake, and began to reason that, very probably, twice the number of Indians that had been concerned in the capture of May were now encamped at no great distance; for such a small party would not be in that section otherwise.

It was too late, however, to remedy his mistake, as to halt for a moment might cause him to lose all trace of the captured maiden.

The Indians had prudently ceased their yells, upon darting into the timber; thus throwing Snap-Shot entirely upon his own resources, as a scout and trapper, to discover and follow the red marauders.

Most disastrous had been the consequences following his attempt to discover the plans of the two villains who were the prime cause of May's having been captured; for the maiden had gone some two miles beyond the point he had intended, although she was, without doubt, unaware of the fact.

Had he remained at his post, and trusted to his own suspicions and May's, in regard to the plans of the miscreants, all might have been

well; for it was doubtful if the Indians would have discovered the train. All regrets, however, were now useless.

So Snap-Shot now realized, in his mad dash to the timber, and his hatred and contempt for James and Monte was so intense, that it would have been dangerous for them to have been, about that time, in the scout's path.

In his grief and excitement he had not paid the slightest attention to aught else; and, as he now sped forward he glanced back toward the wagons to ascertain if the Montfords had galloped on to assist in the rescue; but he saw that both the men sat their horses, near the wagons.

Not until he had made this discovery did the scout recall the dastardly intentions of these cowardly wretches; then, he well knew that they were filled with joy and triumph, on account of the capture of May by the savages; for thus they had disposed of the only one who stood between them and a vast fortune.

The young man fairly grated his teeth as these thoughts flashed through his mind; for it seemed as though the Evil One was aiding both his red and white followers, and sending to despair and death, May Montford and himself as well.

The situation of affairs was most bewildering and demoralizing to Snap-Shot, but by a strong effort of will, he threw off all thoughts of the wagon-train, the teamster and the two plotters; concentrating his senses on the one grand object that he had in view—the rescue of May Montford—even banishing all imaginings as to what must be her horror, in the power of the merciless Apaches; for such the scout knew them to be by their war-whoops.

Upon reaching the margin of the timber, Snap-Shot decided to leave his horse and proceed on the trail on foot; and this, for two reasons.

First, the teamsters would discover the animal, would know that he had abandoned it, and would thus conclude that it was considered by him not only dangerous, but impossible, to follow the Indians mounted. Besides it would lessen their chances to rescue the maiden.

Secondly, he knew that in proceeding through the undergrowth upon his horse, the noise thus made would betray his position; thus causing it to be an easy matter for an Indian to shoot him, besides losing every chance of discovering "sign."

Consequently the scout sprang from his saddle, and leaving his bridle-rein over the horn, to indicate he wished the teamsters to care for the animal, and also to prove that he had purposely abandoned the horse, he darted into the undergrowth—the trail being plain and broad where the score of mustangs had crashed through the bushes, although soon the darkness would cover even this evidence of the trail.

The young scout now, with carbine in the hollow of his left arm, proceeded with speed, but at the same time with caution, for some distance; the trail leading up the river, and turning gradually toward the bank of the stream. At intervals he would stop and listen; but he was unable to detect any sounds indicative of the presence of Indians. Neither, as he knew, had the teamsters followed him, or passed into the timber—a fact which relieved him greatly.

Snap Shot was alone on the trail, but soon he found that he could no longer trace the savages.

The darkness made it impossible to detect any "sign," he must therefore depend entirely upon his sense of hearing, and upon being so fortunate as to strike the Indian camp by accident, or to discover it by the flash of their fires; both of which were very doubtful.

Still, the young man was far from being discouraged, for he had taken note of the fact that the mustangs of the Indians—although he had been such a distance from the animals, betrayed by their manner of galloping that they had been ridden through the day, and were much fatigued.

Consequently he felt positive that the Apaches would not that night proceed a great distance, before forced to encamp.

As the savages had not crossed the river at once, as they might and doubtless would have done had they intended camping on the opposite side of the stream, and as they must camp very soon, Snap-Shot knew the mustangs would be near the camp, which must be either on the border of the timber; or in a roomy "open" in the same, where the animals might graze.

As he was confident there was no "open," for many miles, of sufficient extent for this purpose, he knew that the mustangs of the Apaches

would be found on the border of the bottom-timber; perhaps in some cove-like section of the same, or within a bend.

This reasoning rendered groping in the undergrowth no longer necessary, and the scout at once made his way toward the plain.

By the time that he cleared the timber, it was quite dark even on the prairie; the white-tilted wagons, which he knew were some distance down the stream, being invisible.

He knew, however, that the moon would soon rise, and that he must hasten in his search, while darkness screened him from view.

To be sure, the same gloom hid the savages and their mustangs, but it would not drown the various sounds such a number of animals would make; and therefore he held the advantage, as his progress over the grassy sward, beneath the overhanging branches, was noiseless.

From the fact that thus far he had heard no yells from the Indians, Snap-Shot felt confident that the party of braves who had captured May Montford had not yet joined a larger, or the main, war-party. Had they done so, confident in their strength, they would fill the night air with yells of defiance and exultation, upon the appearance of their fellow warriors with the beautiful white captive.

Through these reflections the scout lost much of his despondency and anguish, feeling more hopeful as he hastened up the river.

For two miles, however, he proceeded without making any discovery, or hearing any sound indicative of the presence of the red marauders; and he was fast relapsing into the old despair when his heart sprang to his throat, and he halted, standing in his tracks, and listening intently.

What he heard was the unmistakable snort of a horse, undoubtedly caused by the annoyance given it by some insect.

The sound was some distance off, but the ears of the scout were keen and eager. He did not hear it repeated, nor did he expect to; and he sunk to the earth, placing his ear upon the sward.

A sigh of intense relief burst from Snap-Shot's lips, for he easily distinguished the stamping of hoofs; and, upon rising from the ground, and passing on, he soon heard the whisking of tails, and more plainly still the stamping of the mustangs, caused by the sting of insects.

The Indians allowed no dogs on the war-path, as our hero well knew; but he also knew that, did the mustangs scent him, or become aware of his presence in any way, they would snort, and create an alarm.

Satisfying himself that he was to leeward of the herd, the scout stole cautiously forward, again halting; for he felt that his position was a most dangerous one.

That some of the warriors were guarding the horses, there was no doubt in Snap-Shot's mind.

Such was most certainly the case, especially as they knew that the Texans, from whom they captured the maiden, were but a short distance down the stream, and doubtless searching for them.

Situated thus, the Apaches would naturally take double precautions against surprise or discovery.

The thick darkness, therefore, was more to be deplored than bright moonlight; for, at any moment, he might stumble over, or upon, a brave, whose knife, ever handy, might pierce his heart. And more especially so, as the keen ears of the silent and motionless Indian would detect his presence, and be prepared for him.

Never before, in all his experience as a scout, ranger, and trailer, had Sidney Staunton occasion to use the prudence and caution, and feel the anxiety as to his success, as upon this occasion; for the fate of one, who was dearer to him than all the world, or than life itself, depended upon his slightest movement.

Much he regretted that he had not left his carbine behind, for the weapon was useless to him, besides impeding his progress; and, in the event of a hand-to-hand struggle with an Indian, it might be the cause of his defeat and death.

Certainly no such risk should be taken.

Nothing must be allowed to jeopardize his hazardous attempt, upon which so much depended.

Thus deciding, Snap-Shot stole back a short distance, and placed his carbine on the upper side of a low-hanging limb, which had brushed his hat as he passed beneath it. Quickly binding the weapon to this branch, and believing there would be little chance of its being noticed, even by daylight, the scout made ready for an imme-

diate attempt to investigate the state of affairs about the stamping mustangs.

The crisis was near at hand!

Life and death, or far worse than death, to May Montford, hung upon the coming few minutes, beyond a possible doubt.

Drawing his long-bladed bowie-knife, which he gripped tightly, he stepped cautiously forward, his muscles and all his senses strained to the utmost to detect the presence of a red foe, and combat with the brave, if he stumbled against one; intending to clutch the throat of the warrior, thus preventing the death-yell, as he plunged his blade into the Apache's heart.

But he must be ready for action, on the instant.

Feeling his way carefully and slowly, by a sloop of his left hand, Snap-Shot stole, half-crouched, toward the mustangs.

To his left were the dense timber and undergrowth, this circumstance enabling him to guide himself, as he passed along just clear of the outer twigs of the bordering bushes.

A darkness like that of stubborn Egypt marked the left, and to his right the open plain was little less so; the sky being just distinguishable from the earth.

At times Snap-Shot gazed into the denser gloom to his right, hoping to catch a glimpse of the glow of a camp-fire; for well he knew that the bivouac of the Indians was but a short distance from the mustangs, and in the timber. But no glow did he discover, neither were there any indications of human beings, except the sounds already mentioned, which must have been made by the animals of the Apaches; for wild horses would not remain at night in the river-bottom, to be tormented by insects, as well as endangered by panthers and other wild beasts.

Neither would the mustangs of the Indians remain, were they not secured.

There was, therefore, no doubt in the young man's mind, in regard to his being near the Apaches, and poor May Montford; the thoughts of what the unhappy girl must now be enduring hastening his movements. Any doubts which Snap-Shot might have had, would soon have been banished; for he had proceeded far, repressing his very breath, and stepping as if on eggs, when his extended hand touched a soft substance, which he knew was not the foliage of the bushes, or the flower of the feathery bottom-grass. Quickly catching it between his thumb and finger, the scout at once dropped it, as if it had been the leg of a tarantula!

It was a terrible moment for him, and more for the reason that the fate of the maiden he adored depended upon it, than any consideration for his own life.

Snap-Shot knew that he had held between his finger and thumb the eagle-feather of an Apache warrior, and that the feather was in the head of a brave, who sat, or reclined, within three feet of him.

Instantly, upon its having flashed upon his mind what it was, he detected the breathing of the brave, and knew that he was awake, and on the alert; but he was evidently facing from the scout, and toward the mustangs, the long hair falling over his ears preventing the Apache from detecting Snap-Shot's stealthy movements.

Not for the fraction of a moment did the brave scout delay; for delay meant death to him, and far worse to May Montford.

From the position of the feather, he could calculate, with almost certainty, where to clutch and inclose the throat of the savage; and his hand went up over the tell-tale badge of rank, then shot downward over the brow of the brave, and before the Apache could even breathe, his power of breathing was ended forever!

For, at the very instant that the vise-like grip was upon his throat, the terrible bowie was buried, to the buckhorn, in the strained breast of the Indian, who had been forced backward. He struggled but a moment, and then lay, limp and gasping.

Snap-Shot straightened himself erect, panting with exertion: his foot on the neck of his victim, to make it doubly sure that no sound should break the silence.

Then he listened intently, fearing that his own heavy breathing, and the death-struggles of the Apache might have alarmed another of the guard, but all was still.

CHAPTER XI. THE RESCUE

Snap-Shot wiped the blood from his bowie and stole forward, satisfied that there was not another brave in the immediate vicinity; but he

went not far, for his interest was not in the mustangs.

The presence of the animals had indicated that the camp was near, and the presence of the warrior whom he had slain was proof conclusive of the same fact.

Stealing along, near the border of the undergrowth, for some ten yards, the scout sunk to his knees and crawled into the bushes toward the river.

Very slow was his progress, as the way was most difficult, and the utmost care was necessary to avoid whisking a branch or breaking a twig. For some minutes he kept on, knowing that it was probable at any time that the guard would be relieved, when the dead brave would be discovered.

This would end his scouting, for it would cause all the party to remain awake and on the alert until morning.

Soon, to his relief, he detected the heavy breathing of men who slept soundly; yet this was no proof that wakeful ones were not present, so he doubled his caution as he went on. At length he perceived the glow of a camp-fire, down in the bed of a dry wash-out.

This was the most trying and anxious moment since he had been on his search.

Was May Montford in this camp, or had she been taken by some of the braves to the main camp of the war-party, these remaining behind to keep watch of the train?

It was too dark to distinguish any object, except a circular portion of the clay bed of the wash-out; a small pile of dead wood being visible near the smoldering embers.

Snap-Shot's mental torture was now terrible.

The next moment a burly brave arose from a thicket near him, and stood for a moment silent, and apparently listening. Then, to the joy of the scout, the Apache, with a low "waugh" of seeming disappointment or anxiety, strode forward, and down into the wash-out, being welcomed by the grunt of another warrior, who now cast some dry twigs on the embers.

Not until then did it occur to the scout, that, did the fire blaze up to any extent, he might be discovered. He, therefore, sunk quickly to the earth, and there remained, his suspense almost unendurable. Nothing was more likely than that he would be seen, and if so, escape was impossible.

And the fire did blaze up, almost immediately, forcing Snap-Shot to lie low; but he turned his head to one side, and was relieved to find a bunch of bottom grass within a foot of his face. Rolling slowly over, which brought this grass between himself and the fire, the scout peered through the outer drooping blades of grass; when, to his surprise, he saw there were only the two braves visible.

A closer inspection, however, revealed the recumbent forms of two others on the opposite side of the wash-out; both evidently sleeping.

These, with the one he had slain, made but five. Where, then, were the others?—some fifteen, as the scout knew, being unaccounted for.

Snap-Shot could scarce suppress a groan of anguish as the thought flashed upon him that May must have been carried away to the camp of the main war-party.

The thought was terrible!

Had his struggle with the Apache guard, and his long and difficult approach to this bivouac, been for nothing?

Had poor May Montford, while he had thus been wasting his time, been dragged through the dark shades afar up the river, each stride of her horse bearing her on to deeper despair?

Beads of perspiration, the sweat of mental agony, stood out upon the brow of the young man at the mere thought. Yet, thus it must have been.

At the moment when Snap-Shot, in his anguish and fury and baffled rage, was meditating upon drawing his revolvers, bounding into the wash-out, and shooting down the red demons—when, in fact, his hands were stealing to his belt for this purpose, his anxiety being unbearable, and knowing he must battle for life in any event—then it was that he detected a gesture of one of the braves, a wave of the hand in the direction of the bank of the wash-out, a little above the fire, and between where he stood and the river. Both braves then bent their gaze on the point indicated, and the scout craned his neck to discover what had drawn their attention, hoping against hope that he might there see the captive.

And to his wild joy and relief, Snap-Shot did

behold May Montford, fast bound to a sapling and evidently gagged; her form from her waist, around which was a lariat which held her fast to the tree, being bent forward; her long, wavy hair hanging in disheveled masses nearly to the earth.

The poor maiden had evidently fainted from terror and the torture of the cruel bonds.

It was a sight to melt a heart of stone, to beget a thirst for murderous revenge upon the inhuman red fiends, even in the breast of an old school Quaker; and the reader may well believe that such a scene would cause the scout to lose all prudence, and think only of rescue and revenge.

But luckily the sight at first bereft him of all power of action, and before he recovered, a rattling fusilade of rifle-reports sounded afar down the stream toward the east; and with ejaculations of relief and vengeful meaning, the two braves bounded up from the wash-out and toward the plain, one of them nearly stepping upon the scout.

The next instant he was upon his feet, revolver in one hand and bowie in the other, and dashing frantically toward the captive Prairie Queen.

"May! May, my darling! Rouse yourself, for God's sake, for my sake, or we are lost!"

Thus cried out Snap-Shot, slashing free the helpless girl from the cruel bonds; but she sunk into his ready arm, limp and senseless still.

The young man thrust his bowie into his belt, clutched his cocked revolver in his right hand, and claspings the form of May Montford to his breast with his left arm, he bounded into the wash-out; but, at the same moment, with fierce yells of rage and hate the two warriors who had been sleeping sprung down upon him, their long scalping-knives flashing in the firelight.

Like a lion at bay stood Snap-Shot, but only for an instant to give a yell of defiance; and then out rung his revolver, echoing and re-echoing through the arches of the bottom-timber with startling effect. Both braves, with a spasmodic flinging up of arms, fell dead in the wash-out without a death-whoop, a bullet having pierced the foreheads and torn through the brains of each!

Hardly had these two Apaches fallen, when the pair, who had rushed toward the plain, bounded back, crashing through the undergrowth, and whooping like demons. They had discovered the slain brave at the very moment that the scout had pulled trigger.

Again broke two sharp reports of the young Texan's revolver, Snap-Shot proving that he deserved well his *sobriquet*, for each of the last braves who fell were shot in the self-same spot as the first two—namely, in the center of their foreheads.

And, while yet the echoes sounded wild and weird through the moss draped domes and arches, the skillful and daring scout, with his darling pressed to his breast, and his kisses upon her cheeks, rushed down the bed of the wash-out into the darkness and temporary safety.

Upon reaching a point where the bed of the gully was on a level with the river, the scout, knowing by the ripple of the waters that he was near the stream, quickly bent down and dashed with his hand quantities of the cool, refreshing wine of nature upon the face and between the parted lips of the unconscious maiden.

The remarkable strength of will and self-reliance which had been cultivated by May Montford since the death of her father, had been broken and banished by the horrors that had surrounded her, the torture of the cruel cords, and the ever-present apprehensions of the probable fate that was in store for her.

No wonder was it that the unhappy girl broke down under the fearful strain.

But the cool waters revived her, and slowly her senses returned; she being at first in a bewildered state, but at length recalled to a sense of her recent danger, she would have shrieked aloud, thinking she was again in the arms of a hideous and repulsive Apache, had not the welcome and familiar tones of the young scout banished her terrors.

The realization that she was in the protecting embrace of Sidney Staunton was so sudden and attended with such exciting emotions, that the poor maiden fairly gasped for breath. She was, for the time, speechless, and could only manifest her feelings by clasping her arms about the scout's neck, and clinging closely to his breast.

It was like being transported, like a flash of light, from the infernal regions into Paradise;

from the exultant clutch of fiends, into the loving embrace of one, who, through the strongest and purest love, ruled her whole soul.

The happiest man on earth was Sidney Staunton, although he was still but a few paces from an Apache camp, into which any number of vengeful braves might, at any moment bound, there to find the corpses of their comrade warriors, and then, with wild whoops, seek him for the torture.

Surrounded by darkness and deadly peril, in the bed of that gloomy gully, for the moment Snap-Shot was oblivious of everything, except that May Montford, his darling, his hope, and joy, was in his arms, and had recovered consciousness.

"Father in Heaven, I thank Thee!" he exclaimed, in heartfelt tones. "Oh! May, darling of my heart and soul, how you must have suffered! Why, oh, why did I leave your side, even for a moment?"

The young girl raised her head, and in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper, she replied:

"May Heaven bless you, Sidney! You have been once more my preserver. Oh, the fearful horrors, through which I have passed, have nearly driven me insane! Where are we, and in what mysterious manner have you accomplished my rescue?"

"I have you, May darling, and that is enough for the present. We have no time now for explanation. We are but a few yards from the Apache camp. There are no living braves there now, but there probably will be before long. Listen to me, May!"

"The red fiends have attacked the train. I have heard them. We must fly! We must gain a position near the train, where I can secrete you, and then assist in defending the wagons. Do you think you will be able to walk a short distance?"

Snap-Shot spoke low, and in a rapid and anxious manner.

The reports of fire-arms could be heard from down the river. The scout knew that the teamsters lacked a leader—knew that many of them must fall victims to the assaulting party of savages!

"Can I walk, Sidney? Certainly I can, for only my arms and wrists pain me. The hideous wretches did not bind my ankles. Oh, the horror of that moment, when the Indians dragged me into the dark timber! I saw you on the plain, and I felt that I would never see, never meet you again."

"I believed that you would rush to my rescue, and be slain. But I am forgetting. For God's sake, let us leave this horrid place. But, can you find your way?"

"We must keep within hearing of the ripple of the river; then we cannot go astray. It is very dark, and the wood is difficult to travel, but there is no alternative. We shall be captured, if we remain here any length of time. The moon will soon be up, and then our danger will be still greater."

"Come! I will assist you to the level, and then we must hasten forward."

A fearful whoop, followed by a hellish howl, now sounded from the camp, which was but a few yards distant, and May clung to the arm of the scout, trembling and speechless with terror.

"Fear not," he said, in a calm and reassuring tone; "that is but a single brave. Still, that is a danger signal; it may be heard by others, and bring a dozen of those demons to the camp!"

"The main portion of the war-party have, no doubt, been warned of the presence of the train. We can evade them, however. This darkness is favorable to us, and makes pursuit impossible."

Hand in hand, Snap-Shot keeping in front of May, and feeling his way, the pair proceeded down the river, keeping near the bank; the ripple of the waters guiding them, while around and overhead all was dark as Erebus.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ATTACK ON THE TRAIN.

NED NORRIS was the most experienced, and well-known teamster of the train. He had charge of the leading wagon, and was looked to for directions. He had, in fact, acted as wagon-master, previous to the advent of Snap-Shot, and by him, as well as others, the orders of James Montford had been heard; but were unnoticed.

Those who understood the uncle of their fair employer were furious that he should attempt to stop them from going to her rescue. Ned, however, before reaching the timber, realized that it would be useless to attempt following the Apaches, on their wearied mules, even if the trail could be detected for any length of time, which was highly improbable.

Again, should the Indians make halt, and form an ambush, the advance of the mules through the bushes would betray the exact position of each rider, and, in the dark shades, the Indians would have every advantage—no doubt slaying the greater portion of their number, while they would not have rendered the slightest service to the Prairie Queen. Thus the teamsters all reasoned.

Yet they kept on, and dashed into the timber, discovering the horse of Snap-Shot, and then understanding that the scout had gone on the trail on foot, leaving the animal; thus indicating to them that it was useless to proceed to the rescue mounted.

"Snap-Shot 'll trail ther red cusses, boyees, an' then levant back arter we-uns, ef he doesn't see no show ter resky ther Perrarer Queen by hisself."

"Hit 'ud be all ronsense fer we-uns ter sneak up-river, crackin' ther bushes; fer ther perrarer pirts 'ud git ther drop on us, dead sure. 'Sides, in ten minuts, yer won't be able ter see 'sign,' even ef hit's ever so plain."

"Slip ther harness, sling hit all in ther bushes, an' gi'n ther critters free range!"

So Ned spoke, and all sprung from their mules, and did at once as directed.

The mules proceeded toward the river, to slake their thirst, first rolling on the leafy carpet.

"Now, boyees, we-uns wants ter lay low, an' keep still," Ned again instructed. "I'd 'vise glidin' back ter ther wagons, ef hit warn't fer one thing."

All gathered around Ned Norris, on the inside of the outer line of bushes, but where they could observe the wagons.

After tearing off a huge quid of "nigger-head," all leaning on their rifles, Ned continued:

"Thet one thing, boyees, air on 'count o' Jim Montford yelpin' et we-uns ter come back an' stay w' ther train. Some on yer, I reckon, heerd ther ole cuss, fer he yelped like a good one."

"Now, I puts hit up that he didn't keer a continental 'bout ther train, but war nigh skeered ter death, an' wanted we-uns ter perfect him. Thet's why I doesn't tend ter skute back until he gits a heap more skeered than he air till yit."

"But ther wo'st o' hit air, ther or'nary ole galoot wanted we-uns ter stay by him an' his precious Monte; not 'pearin' ter keer a dang 'bout ther persish o' Miss May. Thet made me red-hot mad; fer, how'd he, a fresh, know but what we-uns 'ud resky ther pere leetie gal?"

"My opine air, thet he's a dog-gone ole snake, an' orter ter be well skeered, ef not scalped! I reckon we-uns better lay low, an' wait until we hears from Snap-Shot, or until hit's dark, an' then we kin kinder crawl up nigh ther wagons, an' be ready fer biz, ef ther reds shows up, which they're dead sure to do, fer thar's a heap more on 'em than we see'd, an' not many shoots from this point."

"Ef thar hed bin anythin' squar'an' human 'bout ther ole man an' Monte, they'd been ahead of Snap-Shot in ther resky biz. Thar they bees, ther p'ar on 'em, nex' ther hind wagon, an' I'm lettin' my saddle 'gin' a ole lariat they're both 'bout ready ter wilt inter thar butes!"

"They hes no idee we-uns air squatted hyer, an' they thinks they're left plum alone. Shouldn't wonder ef they'd skute on ther back trail. I wish't they would, by gracious! Lay low, boyees, an' don't sling gab, fer thar mought be skulkin' reds 'roun' hyeraways. They ain't goin' ter 'low ther wagons ter slip, without makin' a break ter captur' 'em, an' stompede ther mules."

"Hyer comes ther 'mainder o' ther anermiles! Skin ther harness off'n 'em, an' 'low 'em ter promenade ther timber. Hit's lucky they skuted this-away; though hit's nat'ral they sh'ud' git arter drink. All right; they'll be safer hyer, a heap."

It seemed as though Ned, although he did not consider that his comrades ought to talk, could not possibly refrain from quite a long discourse on the situation of affairs, himself.

The mules, as quickly as was possible, after they had reached the bottom-timber, were divested of their harness; and not a living, moving object was then visible at or near the wagons, except the horses of James and Montgomery Montford.

The two miscreants had crawled into a wagon, being observed in the act by the teamsters, who fairly rolled upon the ground with half-suppressed laughter. Knowing the scout as they did, they felt confident that Snap-Shot would either rescue the Prairie Queen, or trace her and her captors, secure all the information he could, in regard to her position, and then return and lead them to the camp of the Apaches.

Ned, as well as the scout, had noticed that the mustangs of the Indians were fagged, and had also reasoned that the Apaches would not proceed far with their captive; especially as they would, without doubt, seek, with the help of others of the war-party, who could not be a very great distance off, to capture the wagon-train.

Even were the main portion of the hostile horde too distant to be available, Ned believed that those who had captured Miss Montford would leave her with a small guard; the remainder returning, their object being to stampede the mules, which, under ordinary circumstances could be accomplished by a few braves with but a little risk; more especially if the attempt were made before the moon had arisen.

Ned Norris, in a low tone, explained all this to his comrades, with the effect of relieving the minds of many, who had been much worried and anxious in regard to the captured young lady.

From the fact that the mules had all come to the bottom-timber, and would, fatigued as they doubtless were, crop sufficient of the luscious wild rye near the river to satisfy their appetites, and not wander

out on the plain—from this the teamsters felt also much relieved; for, they were confident that the Indians would be balked in any attempt to stampede the herd, the location of the animals being unknown.

As such a stampede would be attempted only by mounted braves, it would be very difficult to accomplish in the timber, even did they know the exact location of the mules; in which event, after the moon arose, the teamsters would have an excellent chance to shoot down many of the Apaches.

Soon it became so dark, that it was considered, by Ned, safe to advance toward the wagons, without danger of being observed by James and Monte; who had betrayed their extreme ignorance and want of reason, by leaving their horses secured to the wheels of the rear wagon, without removing the saddles from the animals. This would be conclusive proof to any lurking spy, that two white men were with the wagons, who could very easily be slain or captured.

Still more foolish had they proved themselves to be, by crawling into the same wagon to which their horses were secured. These circumstances were the subject of ridicule by the teamsters, who, from the first, had looked upon James and Monte with contempt.

They were all satisfied that there was something "crooked" about the two men, and they believed, or had strong suspicions, that wrong was meditated toward the Prairie Queen. These opinions were formed from noticing that Miss Montford treated her uncle and his step-son with ill concealed contempt and distrust, and did not associate with them when she could avoid doing so.

Yet none could clearly understand the case.

Since the arrival of Snap-Shot, all had noticed that the young lady was quite familiar with him; riding side by side with him, and thus proving that she respected him much more than she did her relatives. They were evidently furious on this account, and it was plain to see that they bore no kindly feeling toward the guide.

That the occurrences of the evening would cause these feelings, in each party, to be stronger and more intensified, all believed; even to open rupture, should the Indians not prevent it. For, neither of the Montfords showed the slightest alarm, except on their own account; or evinced, in the least degree, any disposition to rescue Miss May—in fact, just the opposite, for they had tried to prevent others from going in pursuit of the Apaches.

There could not have been a time more favorable to the Indians for an attack; and the only explanation Ned could think of was, that the savages were then prowling about in the grass, for the purpose of ascertaining the position of the herd of mules; and that, then, some of their number intended to dash upon the animals—the reds being mounted upon their mustangs—and then, with terrific yells, stampede the stock over the plain, those on foot, when this had been accomplished, attacking the wagons.

If the hostile force was small, they would, without doubt, make the attempt soon; as, when the moon illuminated the plain, they would be exposed to the fire of the Texans. Already the eastern heavens were beginning to brighten, as the teamsters gained a favorable position near the wagons at a point where they knew the Indians were not liable to trouble them; as the latter would, doubtless, make their advance from the west, or from up the stream.

From the fact that the two cowardly villains had left their horses secured to the very wagon into which they had crawled, the teamsters expected to be warned of the presence of the Indians from that very quarter; as the horses would be the only animals in the vicinity of the wagons, and would betray their presence to the red spies at once.

Nor were they mistaken in this respect; for but a short time had elapsed when, from the wagons in question came the snorts of fright, and sounds that indicated the running back and forth of the two animals. Then spurts of fine shot from the rear of the wagon, as a rattling discharge of revolver-reports sounded on the night air, mingled with the yells of savages, and loud outcries from James and Monte Montford.

These were the shots which caused the two Apaches to rush from the wash-out, up the river, thus giving Snap-Shot a favorable opportunity of cutting May Montford loose from the tree.

Instantly after the momentary din of fight, the teamsters heard the two horses galloping off at headlong speed.

Then all became silent as death.

"Three or four on yer come on wi' me, boyees, ter ther wagon! Dang'd ef hit doesn't 'pear es though ther reds hes gut away wi' ther greenies; though I sw'ar they showed game, an' pulled t'riggers right peart. Two o' ther cusses skated wi' ther nags, but they wouldn't ef they'd thought ther hull on us war layin' roun', ready ter scoop 'em in."

So said Ned Norris, and in a few moments he and his pards reached the wagon, stumbling over two dead Apaches. Upon examining the wheels, to which the horses had been secured, they found that the neck-ropes had been cut.

Ned crouched under the wagon-body, and cried out:

"Mister Montford, ef yer thar, squeal, an' yer needn't mind wastin' powder on we 'uns!"

Not a voice or sound came from the wagon.

Ned then sprang up, and crawled inside, over the freight, emerging from the hole in the tilt in front.

"Hit's ormighty strange, boyees," he said, "but I sw'ar they ain't in ther wagon! Hes any on yer run ag'in' thar corpusses?"

The other teamsters, who had tramped around the wagon for some distance, answered in the negative.

"Wa-al, hit's puzzlin', pard—dog'd ef hit ain't! I didn't 'low ther freshes war up ter snuff ter ther extent o' makin' sich a brash fight, an' dog-gone me ef they didn't both git away!"

"Ther question air, war they on ther nags? Hit 'u'd seem they'd know 'nough not ter levant up crick, right inter ther reds, with a good show ter brake thar necks runnin' inter ther barranca; an' I doesn't believe hit war Monte an' ther ole man what rid ther hosses. Hit war reds; but whar in thunderation's ther greenhorns?"

This was a question not easily answered. James and Monte had, without doubt, stolen away to a less dangerous locality, after proving that they had been on the alert, and had defended themselves, slaying two of the enemy, and frightening the others away.

Still lighter grew the eastern heavens, and Ned, believing an attack would soon be made, and that it was his duty to protect the property of the Prairie Queen—as nothing could be done toward rescuing her—stationed his pards, in the tall grass, to the north of the wagons, ready to repel the savages; reasoning, and with good grounds, that it would be madness to remain in the wagons, where they could not use their fire-arms to advantage.

Thus crouched, frequently gazing at the eastern horizon, the line of teamsters waited for the red foe. Soon they were startled by another fusillade, which sounded from between the wagons and the river.

"Ther reds air skulkin' 'roun', boyees, an' ther greenhorns made a streak fer timber, runnin' ag'in' some o' ther 'Paches, sure es ye're born."

"Reckon they've gut a few arrers into 'em, er scalpin'-knives, 'bout now. Howsomever, this air our best place, an' we'll lay low hyer; fer thar's bloody biz ter come, bet yer scalp!"

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE RUTHLESS THAN THE RED-MEN.

UNDER the circumstances, it was not strange that Snap-Shot, the scout, felt very anxious and worried. It is true he had been greatly favored by fate, in having rescued May from the savages; but, in all else, he was gloomy and almost hopeless.

The sound of fire-arms, from the direction of the train, not only proved that the Apaches had attacked the wagons; but also, that the party who had captured May Montford had been reinforced. He felt certain that fifteen braves, all who were absent from the camp, would not dare attack an equal number of well-armed Texans; therefore the young man had no doubt that a large force of Apaches was in the near vicinity; indeed, as the whoops and howls in the camp from which he had rescued May proved, quite a number of warriors must have been drawn thither by the reports of his revolver, and the yells of their comrades. This was at nearly the same time that the sounds of conflict came from down the river; and it left no doubt in the scout's mind as to the arrival in the neighborhood of the main portion of the war-party.

However, his words and manner, as he hastened through the dark shades, assisting the affrighted girl, were such as to encourage and reassure her.

Snap-Shot had but little hope of saving the train of wagons, or the mules; for he reasoned that the teamsters had, upon realizing the impossibility of following the trail, and of being any use in the rescue of their mistress, removed the harness, herded the animals on the plain, and taken up their position at the wagons, to defend them.

In the darkness the Indians could easily stampede the mules without danger to themselves.

As to the Montfords being of any use, as advisers and leaders in the defense, this was preposterous; and, after the proofs he had of their perfidious character, the scout really hoped both would be slain.

Perhaps his horse would be stolen by the Apaches, and the animals of the two plotters and the extra beasts as well.

This would leave himself and May, to travel on foot in the wilds, surrounded by deadly dangers.

The mules stampeded, the wagons destroyed, and the teamsters slain or captured—all this seeming probable, caused the scout great anxiety.

The only hope was for him to join the teamsters, and defend the train and mules. He was thankful that the grass was rank and high in the vicinity of the train, thus affording concealment.

For all that, the outlook was gloomy; in fact, it was with but little hope that the scout hurried toward the point where he had left his horse.

As they thus proceeded with great caution, the scout at times bearing May in his arms, and neither of them daring to speak for fear of betraying themselves to some lurking savage, the moon arose—a brightening of the shades announcing this fact.

The scout expected now to hear the sounds of conflict resumed, but all was still.

In time they reached the point, near where Snap-Shot had sprung from his horse to proceed on the trail; and then the young man became aware, by sounds readily interpreted, that a large number of animals were in the bottom-timber, between his position and the river.

He decided at once that the mules of the train were safe, and, as he soon perceived plain signs that they had entered the timber at that point, a further investigation revealing the harness of the animals, hope began to dawn upon him.

"Darling," he said, "if we can join the teamsters, I think we can repel those red fiends. We are lost, indeed, if they destroy the wagons and stampede the mules. Thank Heaven! The boys were so

thoughtful as to drive them into the river-bottom, and the Indians have not discovered them.

"The men are, I am positive, at the wagons, and the savages are preparing for a grand charge. Luckily I caused an alarm at the camp, or the attack by the whole force would probably have occurred before this time."

"Come, May, and let us take a peep at the wagons, and then I will assist you to a safe position, where you can remain until I rejoin you. I shall not be long."

"But, oh, Sidney, you may be killed! Do remain with me. Let the savages do their worst with the wagons and the mules. Our lives are of much more importance. I cannot let you leave me!"

"But, May, you forget that those brave teamsters, who consider it their duty to die, if it must be, in defending your property, are there."

"They are secreted, I am positive, awaiting the onslaught of the Apaches, and they are without a leader. It would be most detestably mean and cowardly in me, were I to remain here, while they were battling the foe at such a disadvantage."

"As to your villainous and most unnatural relatives, they will be of no use as commanders; and from what I overheard from them of their dastardly character, I should consider it no more than a just judgment upon them, should the Indians even torture them to death."

"May, I overheard those vile wretches plotting to shoot me, and afterward murder you. Then James Montford, the next heir, was to claim everything that your father had left."

"Can it be possible," exclaimed the girl, "that they are so bad, so heartless as that? I could not have believed that of them, although I had a suspicion that James Montford would endeavor to get me in his power, and then force me into a marriage with Monte."

"It was indeed fortunate that you lingered behind and listened to them; notwithstanding, we have been placed in a position of great peril through my foolish persistence in continuing on beyond the point at which you directed me to encamp."

They had halted, while they thus conversed in low tones. But a few steps more would enable them to gain a view of the open, moonlit plain and the wagons.

"Come, May," said the scout, "we will not talk further on this subject. Time is precious. Indeed, life and death may depend upon a moment."

"Look! There are the wagons, and not a single human being, or even a brute, in the broad view."

"But in the grass are crouched our trusty men, and I dare say four times their number of Apaches. The silence is suggestive, I fear, of fiendish tumult and death, when the nearness of the red demons is considered."

"Come, May, and quickly! Here is a huge tree, with low branches, where, concealed from view, you can safely observe the events which are soon to occur, if I am not greatly mistaken."

They reached the foot of a mammoth, moss-draped tree, where the scout placed the maiden among the leafy screens.

"Oh, Sidney!" she pleaded; "only think, if you should be slain, what a death awaits me! If I see you killed, I shall fall senseless from the tree. Do not leave me here!"

"Say no more, May! You will unman me. I cannot, and do not, believe, that you will be left defenseless to the mercy of those fiends. I shall not be slain. I shall soon return. I feel it—I know it!"

"Up, darling, and be your own brave self! Drive fear from your breast. You will not see me, except after the onslaught of the foe, for I shall crawl in the tall grass. Remain perfectly quiet, and may Heaven protect you!"

So saying, Sidney Staunton assisted May to gain the lower branches, she speechless with the depth of her emotions, as she disappeared among the vines, foliage, and moss.

The next moment the scout stole through the bushes to the border of the undergrowth, sunk to the earth, and began to crawl, on his long and wearisome way, through the grass to the wagons. His heart was racked with anxiety and anguish, at having been forced to leave his darling alone and unprotected in the dark shades, a witness to horrors that would appall the stoutest heart.

But had Snap-Shot known that, concealed in a thicket, having heard every word that he and May had spoken, were James and Monte Montford, their faces contorted with every evil passion—it requiring all their power of will to withhold themselves from bounding forth and shooting down both man and maiden—had he known this, what would he not have felt?

Doubtless the miscreants would have committed this double crime had not the words spoken by the young scout proved that soon May Montford would be in their power. He, they fully believed, would be slain by the red marauders they had so successfully eluded.

Had Snap-Shot known that these dastards were in the bottom-timber, the events which were destined soon to happen would have been far different in character and results.

Probably the disaster and death would have been complete and overwhelming, had not the scout acted as he did; which proved in the end fortunate, and indeed providential, although that it should thus prove would have seemed impossible to poor May a few minutes after the departure of Snap-Shot; and which, had he known what was so soon to occur, would have caused him to believe that justice and mercy slept, and that a thousand and one deaths were destined to be his.

Yet the fates, in mercy, spared him from the knowledge, which would have unnerved his arm.

now so much needed in the terrible struggle to come.

"By St. Iago!" muttered James Montford, between his clenched teeth to Monte, as he clutched the arm of the latter in a painful grip; "the infernal spy heard every word we uttered back there on the creek! Lucky for us that the Apaches put in an appearance as they did, or that cursed scout would have had us lynched by the teamsters!"

"There is but one way open now for us. The scout and May Montford must both of them die! Then the train can go to the devil."

"Everything is turning out right. We can say that the Indians killed her; and as the red howlers will, without doubt, kill Snap-Shot—why, we're all right. Events have transpired that have favored us at every turn."

"We escaped lynching by the appearance of the Apaches; escaped the red braves by the skin of our teeth; and now that blasted scout brings May Montford right under our noses, and leaves her alone! The game is ours, Monte."

"When I saw the girl alive, and him with her, by Heavens! I came near bursting a blood-vessel in my rage! I believed that both had been slain by the Indians in the timber."

"Excuse me, governor, from agreeing with you in regard to the smoothness of things," returned young Montford, dubiously. "Our horses are gone, the train is doomed, and even if we make away with the girl, and the reds obligingly kill Snap-Shot, still we are in a deuce of a fix."

"We are afoot in a wild and strange country with a pack of Apaches all around us, seeking to clutch us for the torture-stake. That's how the land lies. I wish I was back in Galveston."

"Curse you, Monte! You have no back-bone. You weaken just when we have the game in our own hands. Blast the Indians! We can easily evade them and strike for San Antonio."

"Come! We must go for the girl, as sly as panthers. She must not scream, or our gray is spilled. Best wait until the reds begin to yell, and then we can make sure of her, let her shriek as she may."

"I should say that was the more prudent way. But, in what way will you get rid of her?"

"That depends on circumstances. Perhaps we had better throw her into the river."

"I dare say she can swim!"

"Scare the senses out of her, to begin with, and she won't swim then! I don't care to knife her."

"I should say not! It's a tough job, governor. Just think—she is your brother's child."

"I don't propose to think of anything except Morgan's money. Gold is heavier than blood. I believe I'd put my own father out of the way, if I was hard up for money, and he had plenty, or stood between me and a fortune as this minx does. I hate her, and I hate that infernal scout just as bad!"

"He thinks he has got a soft thing of it, counting on winning a beautiful wife, and a fortune with her."

Not for long had the miscreants to wait; for, before many minutes, the plain rung with the wild war-whoops of many Indians, and up the tree darted the two dastards, clutching poor May, who sat dazed by the fearful sight upon the moonlit plain, and the fearful sounds that tortured her ears.

The mingled fear, horror, and anxiety, which took possession of poor May Montford, as the war-whoops sounded, and the war-painted horde met her view, was so paralyzing, that, she at first—when she was grasped by, as far as she knew, some wild beast—was incapable of speech or motion. So dumfounded and despairing was she, as the exultant words of her dastard uncle hissed in her ears, that she was as powerless as an infant.

"We've got you, miss, and you must die! You stand between me and gold—gold, do you hear?"

"Never again shall you see your gallant Snap-Shot. We snap our fingers at him. After you are out of the way, he, if he escapes the Apaches, dies also. We'll lay you side by side in death. Ha! ha! that's accommodating, ain't it?"

"Climb down, Monte! I'll drop her to you, and I don't care a cuss whether you catch her or not. A broken leg won't amount to anything for a few minutes."

And in fact, before Montgomery Montford reached the ground, down, crashing through the vines, the cowardly villain dropped the terrified girl!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RED-MEN ROUTED.

SNAP-SHOT, the scout, had approached many an Indian and outlaw camp, by crawling amid the prairie grass; and, upon this occasion, he made fast time, being confident that the Apaches were preparing for a charge, after having ascertained the situation of affairs about the wagons, as far as was possible during the darkness.

The reports of revolvers, which he had heard when near and at the Apache camp, proved that there had been a struggle between some of the teamsters and the Indian spies. It was possible that the savages had not gained knowledge of the whereabouts of the mules, indeed it was quite probable.

It surprised the scout, that there were no animals at the wagons. Where the horses of James and Monte could be was strange, to say nothing of the miscreants themselves. Possibly the latter might be in the wagons, but Snap-Shot did not believe they would mingle with the teamsters.

Upon reaching the north side of the wagons, and keeping a reasonable distance from them, the scout uttered a peculiar whistle, which was immediately answered; and, a few moments later, Ned Norris crawled forward to meet him.

"Dog-goned ef I ain't chock-full an' b'ilin' over with glad, ter see yer ag'in," said Ned, in a low tone.

"Whar's Miss May? Dang hit, don't yer say yer hain't see'd her, an' gut her outen ther clutches o' ther red heathun! I c'u'dn't ha' kept ther boyees hyeraways, ef I hedn't 'sured 'em she war all hunk."

"Miss Montford is all right, Ned. She is in the bottom-timber. But, say—what has been the rumpus here, and where are the boys posted? Where are those two sneaks, the old man and Monte?"

"Ther boyees air strung along hyer, ready fer biz; an' hit's comin' hot and heavy—bet yer last cartridge! Es ter Jim Montford an' Monte, I c'u'dn't say whar they war. Hit war they thet hed ther leetle rumpus wi' ther reds, an' they shootet two bucks et ther wagons."

"They put fer timber afore moon-up, an' run ag'in' some more o' ther heathuns, I reckon; fer we-uns heerd ther shooters."

"Where are the horses?"

A wild and vengeful light shot from the eyes of the scout, as he asked this question.

"Ther reds gut away wi' ther nags, I'm dead sure; fer ther lariats war cut from ther wheels."

"What shall we do, Ned? Those two villains have taken to the timber, and that poor girl is in more danger from her own uncle, than from the Apaches. This is terrible!"

"Wa-al, double up an' dang me ef I ain't surprised! I know'd—leastways I opined—they war sorter crooked; but, by ther bleed o' Crockett thet's most too hefty a dose ter swaller! Hit doesn't 'pear possible, an' dang'd ef hit shell be did! We-uns 'll hack 'em inter shoe-strings."

"What's ter be did, Snap-Shot, in this hyer mixed up biz? I'm dead flustered!"

A repetition of the signal that had been given by the scout, now startled our two friends, and upon gazing quickly and instinctively, westward, they perceived that the decisive moment had arrived; for, up from the barranca, exactly as before, shot Apache after Apache, lashing their mustangs furiously as they rode.

"Back to your station, Ned! Quick!" cried out Snap-Shot, excitedly: "it's too late to make a break for the river. We'll do our best to save the train, and then let those wretches look out if they have harmed May Montford."

"Don't fire a shot. I'll pass a hiss along the line, and then give the signal. They don't know where we are secreted and we have the advantage."

This was said as the two crawled side by side. Ned took his position to the right of the line, and Snap-Shot crawled along the front, repeating his directions.

"Don't pull a trigger until you get the signal. Each pick the brave directly ahead of him. We'll give them our carbines and then everlastingly pick the triggers of our sizes!"

Just as the scout reached the left of the line, the wild and startling war-whoop shot from every Apache throat. At the same instant the quirt of every brave hissed through the air, and the whacks about the hams of the mustangs were plainly heard in the still night air by the crouching line of brave and determined teamsters.

With snorts of pain and fright from their steeds, on in a long line swept the Apache horde, each drawing bow and arrow, and at times shooting forth their blood-curdling war-cry.

A grand and imposing sight it was, their hideousness being magnified by the moonlight.

Much depended upon the next few moments, and Snap-Shot, thinking only of her whom he had left in the tree, perhaps to be discovered and murdered by her dastard uncle, could hardly refrain from bounding to his feet and dashing madly to the timber, in front of the avalanche of death, the on-dashing horde of murder-mad, whooping Apaches.

Seldom has man suffered more mental anguish than did Sidney Staunton after having been informed by Ned that the two miscreants had escaped to the timber.

From the manner and course of the Apaches it seemed that they were somewhat puzzled in regard to there not being any whites in view; and also, that the herd of mules, which they coveted greatly, were not to be seen upon the plain.

It was also evident that the Indians believed the Texans to be in the wagons, for they charged directly to the south of the train, between it and the timber, and then wheeled, all facing the vehicles. Then they charged with wild whoops, to within half bow-shot, sending a cloud of arrows flying into the white tilts of the wagons, many of them passing directly through both sides, falling in the grass to the north of the wagons, and between them and the crouching Texans.

Yet no sound broke upon the air. The wagons still remained without any indication of life beneath the white tilts, from which now projected many feathered shafts. Few there were of the Apache braves who did not now cause their mustangs to prance and dart here and there, in anticipation of the volley of death dealing bullets which they fully expected, and which they wished thus to evade.

But all remained still as before.

Warriors gazed at each other in amazement, yet, too, suspicious, and knowing but too well the effect of the deadly rifles and revolvers of the Texans to advance upon the train.

But not long did this continue; for several young braves, desirous of distinguishing themselves before their more experienced and ranking comrade, dashed up to the wagons, braving as they fully believed, almost certain death, and inserting the long scalping-knives in the rear portions of their tilts, urged their mustangs along the side of the vehicles;

thus slashing the cloth from end to end, midway between the top of the wagon-body and the higher portion of the hoops. The lower parts of the cloth dropped downward, revealing the interior, and disclosing the fact that nothing except tightly-packed freight was inside.

This caused wild yells of triumph, which were followed, however, by vengeful whoops; all having been prepared for the fight, and determined upon securing scalps, and captives for the torture, besides driving the mules to their far-away village.

Yet the search for the whites could be resumed in a few moments.

Curiosity and a desire to know what was the character of the freight they had captured—perhaps having a strong thirst for liquor, created by the knowledge that few trains were without it—led them now to lash their mustangs in a mad mob to the wagons; most of the war-party collecting, as it happened, about three wagons which were nearest to the ambushed teamsters.

The tilts were completely ripped off, some of the braves tossing the jaw-strings of their mustangs to their fellows, and bounding upon the vehicles, forming three swarms, or distinct mobs, of gesticulating, disputing and frantically eager braves.

Then it was that a sharp whistle startled every Apache, causing each one to gaze in wonder and apprehension, north of the train. They were just in time to see a line of fire spurts, followed by the thunderous report of thirteen rifles fired as one—the conical ounce bullets tearing through the massed braves—and before those who were not struggling in the agonies of terrible wounds, or had uttered the horrible death-yell, could recover from their terrified bewilderment, again the same rifle-tubes vomited fire and lead.

The scene that followed, it would be impossible to describe!

Fear-frenzied and wounded mustangs flew madly here and there, death-yells, whoops, and rallying-cries filling the air; and, before the uninjured braves could dash from the danger and form in battle array to defend themselves, the Texans, with their dreaded battle-cry, delivered in taunt and defiance, rushed to the wagons; crouching behind the same to avoid the clouds of arrows.

A continuous rattling fusillade of revolver-shots created such an overwhelming death in their midst, that the remaining Apaches lashed their mustangs furiously toward the barranca; only making halt when far beyond the range of the Texan rifles.

Never was a war-party more dumfounded, surprised and demoralized.

Full a score of their number had they left behind, dead or dying; while many who escaped had been desperately wounded, though they yet clung to their saddles.

Then out on the night air sounded the exultant cheers of the Texans; but, as these became hushed by the piercing whistle of the scout, and a gesture commanding attention, Snap-Shot called out in a voice clear as a bell:

"Follow me, boys! First at the reds, and then to the timber! The Prairie Queen is in danger of death!"

A vengeful yell from the teamsters was then heard; and, to the further amazement of the Indians, they beheld the Texans rushing madly on foot toward them, yelling like fiends, and flourishing their terrible revolvers about their heads.

It was probably the first time that the Apaches had been charged by white foes on foot, and it created, or rather increased, the bewilderment and dread that had been occasioned by the massacre at the wagons; and, although nearly numbering three to one against the Texans, the savages fled, lashing their animals on toward the barranca, really believing that the whites were aided and protected by the Bad Spirit of their traditions.

Only a short distance did the Texans run westward, for they turned, at a yell from Snap-Shot, south, toward the timber; bent on protecting the Prairie Queen, although none except the scout and Ned Norris had the remotest idea what danger it was that threatened her, as they believed the Indians to have been in full force in their recent attack.

All had passed the word along the line, when they lay crouched in the grass, that Miss Montford had been rescued by Snap-Shot, and was safe; consequently they were puzzled, but they relied implicitly upon their leader.

Soon all dashed into the timber, the young scout rushing at once to the tree, within the branches of which he had secreted May Montford.

"May! O o-o-oh, May!"

Thus cried Sidney Staunton, in an agony of apprehension.

There was no response.

All was silent as the grave.

Sidney climbed hastily up the tree, still calling out.

The teamsters all gazed upward, anxious, troubled and apprehensive.

Soon Snap-Shot dashed, in reckless haste, down from the tree; bounding to the earth from the lower limbs, as he yelled in a hoarse voice, in which agony and fury were blended:

"Great Heavens, boys! Miss Montford is gone! She has been captured by Jim Montford and hisson, and those villains intend to murder her!"

"Explain to the boys, Ned, for I cannot!"

And Snap-Shot staggered against the tree-trunk, overcome, for the moment, by the intensity of his emotions.

"Death ter ther white-livered hellyuns!"

"Cotch 'em an' string 'em up a limb!"

Such were the cries that rung from the teamsters. Then sounded out again the dread war-whoop of the Apaches on the plain!

CHAPTER XV.

THE BATTLE OF THE BARRANCA.

"Jump mules, boys, and charge the red devils! Ned, take command, and protect the wagons! Where is my horse? I go, and alone, this time again to the rescue of May Montford!"

Thus yelled the young scout, as soon as he sufficiently recovered himself.

"Yer hoss air in ther thicket, Snap-Shot," said Ned, pointing to the south. "Saddle an' bridle air thar, too. Come on, boyees; we'll salervate ther red sons o' Satan! Ketch a saddle-wheeler, every one on yer, an' be lively!"

This was uttered in a hasty and commanding voice.

The scout rushed to the thicket indicated by Ned, and proceeded with alacrity to equip his faithful bay.

The teamsters glided here and there among the herd of mules, each selecting the animal belonging to his wagon; and each having secured a neck-rope, which was quickly run from the neck along the lower jaw, a loop formed around it, and in a few moments the teamsters, led by Ned Norris, dashed from the timber, the mules having been refreshed and rested, and galloped through the tall grass toward the wagons.

Upon breaking free from the undergrowth the teamsters, as they had expected, discovered the Apache horde speeding headlong toward the wagons—indeed, the Indians were but a short distance from the train.

"Hold up, boyees!" yelled Ned; "we'll low ther condemned cusses ter gather up ther corpses, an' then we'll gi'n 'em 'Hail Columby.' Git yer shooters ready fer biz!"

This order from Ned proved that he was well posted in regard to the Indians, for had the Texans charged upon the Apaches before the latter had secured their dead, the red-men would have fought with twice the ferocity and desperation.

As it was, the policy of the whites was to be wary and extremely prudent, relying more on the impression they had already made on the Indians through strategy than on their ability to cope with so formidable a force on their mules.

The mustangs could be more readily handled, were more fleet of foot, and the reds outnumbered the whites nearly three to one.

These were the disadvantages under which our friends labored, and they were well aware of the same.

On the other hand, their six-shooters were greatly dreaded by the savages; but they could not be used with any sure success, when mounted in motion, except at close quarters. Indeed they must be much nearer than safety from the deadly arrows required.

Ned studied the situation with critical eyes, knowing that the lives of all, and the safety of the train and mules depended upon the successful issue of the coming charge. He soon detected one thing that was strongly in favor of himself and friends, and which caused him to thank his lucky star that he had ordered a halt.

This was, that when the Indians recovered their dead, just as many living braves as the dead numbered, would be placed in a position, in which they could do little, if any, fighting; as they would be forced to carry the corpses, no extra horses having been brought along for this service.

It was plain to the whites, that the red-men were considerably astonished at the re-appearance of their foes; now mounted upon mules, and seemingly ready for the fray. The stampede of the teamsters, into the timber, had been considered by the Apaches as a retreat, and abandonment of the wagon-train. Most furious and vengeful were their amazement at the appearance of the Texans; especially when the latter halted, as ordered by Ned, this causing the Indians to infer that their warlike array and numbers had frightened the whites.

There was a momentary hesitation and halt of the war-party, and then, with fierce yells, and a determination to recover their dead, they dashed wildly forward.

Undaunted and firm the Texans sat in their saddles, awaiting the signal yell of their leader, when the Apaches should be incumbered with the corpses of their slain. Some time had passed before this was accomplished.

No attempt was made to plunder the wagons, as the evident cowardice of the Texans, in halting, gave the Indians more confidence; they believing, without doubt, that they would be the victors—that the train, its contents, and the teamsters, would all be theirs.

It was manifest, however, at last, that the Apaches realized how greatly weakened their force was, by being burdened with their slain comrades; and, causing the doubly laden mustangs to proceed toward the barranca, the remaining braves kept between them and the Texans, with the evident intention of leaving the dead on the bank, and then returning in full force to the fight.

But the Apaches had not gained half the distance toward their objective point, when they perceived the great mistake they had made, and the cunning of the whites; for a wild, triumphant yell came from every Texan throat, and all urged their mules at headlong speed to the wagons—the mules being secured to the wheels on the northwest sides of those vehicles the tilts of which had been cut.

This movement was so quickly performed, that the astonished Apaches still sat their mustangs in silence. Then, with redoubled yells of taunt and derision, and with insulting gestures, the Texans, in three positions—each end, and the middle of the train—stood, flourishing their revolvers; their rifles having been secreted in the bottom-timber, as use-

less in a mule charge. This they had thought, would be their best mode of attacking the savages.

The whoops of the latter were now simply terrific, as they recovered from their surprise, and realized the advantage the whites had gained.

Ned feared that they would turn the tables, by galloping to the bottom-timber, and stampeding the herd of mules, as they must know the animals were there; but the Apaches were so infuriated, and eager for revenge, that, without doubt, they thought of nothing else; for they sped to the bank of the barranca, deposited their dead upon the grass, and then, in a mad mob, returned to the wagons in a terrible charge!

But, as their first volley of arrows flew, the Indians charging on both sides of the train, forcing the Texans to crawl under the vehicles, then the terrible, deadly "Colts" began to speak, and warriors fell right and left with horrible death-whoops.

So maddened were the Apaches at their losses in the first part of the attack, that they seemed to have lost all judgment; for, in place of attacking one party of the whites—which course must have ended in the annihilation of the Texans—they dashed along the whole length of the train on each side of the same, and the teamsters did not pull trigger unless assured that every bullet would count.

The terrific and galling fire of the revolvers, which caused such a number of their braves to fall dead or dying upon the plain, so demoralized the Apaches, that they drew away out of range; realizing as they glanced over their ranks, that one-half of their war-party had gone to the happy hunting-grounds, while there seemed no possibility of dislodging the hated whites.

After a brief consultation, the chiefs gave peculiar yells, and the braves, in a scattered line, sped off, swooping in pairs toward one of their wounded or slain comrades. One on either side, they grasped each outstretched form by the arms and dashed out of the range of the revolvers, the bloody corpse dangling between the fast flying mustangs.

Not a shot was fired by the Texans, while the Apaches were recovering their dead, but the time was occupied in reloading; Ned Norris passing the word for all to prepare to mount the mules, and charge at his signal-yell. For he felt that the savages, upon being thus repulsed and weakened, would doubtless abandon the attempt to capture and destroy the wagons, but they would perhaps dash for the timber and stampede the mules.

The Apaches, with howls for the dead alternating with vengeful whoops, proceeded again toward the barranca, again incumbered with the slain; and they filled the air with howls as they carried the corpses down into the deep chasm.

Ned knew that the first braves, who bore the dead from view, could have but reached the bed of the barranca, when mingled shrieks of terror and exultant whoops rung out on the air.

At first the teamsters thought that Snap-Shot had been captured, but upon reflection they knew he would not thus shriek out if it were so. Then it flashed through their minds that it must be the Prairie Queen, who had again fallen into the power of the merciless and infuriated red marauders.

"Jump critters, boyees!" yelled their leader; "ther smoky sons o' Satan hev corraled ther Per-rarer Queen! Come on, an' fight like fiends!"

But eight of the teamsters however presented themselves mounted for service, including Ned; two being beyond all pain, and two badly wounded, although everything had been done for the latter that it was possible for them to do.

Not a moment of delay occurred, for all were filled with apprehension on account of May Montford, and determined to rescue her, or die in the attempt. Besides this, they feared that Snap-Shot had also fallen into the power of the Apaches. This seemed probable, as the scout had gone in search of May.

All dashed in a line toward the barranca.

A few moments of fast galloping brought the Texans to the point where the Apaches had appeared and then disappeared: when a strange and impressive, and horrible scene burst upon their view.

When the first braves had yelled, as the teamsters knew, upon discovering an enemy, those who had remained on the plain had immediately led their mustangs down into the barranca, leaving more than a score of their ghastly, blood-smeared slain lying upon the grass above, and forgetful evidently of all else but the anticipated vengeance born of the discovery they had made.

The scene that now met the view of the little band of Texans was unexpected, and far from increasing their emotions which had been produced by the conclusions they had arrived at, as to the cause of the commotion.

The Apaches had two captives, white at that; but they, as the teamsters decided, richly merited the fate that without doubt was in store for them.

These captives were James and Montgomery Montford.

The plottings of these two miscreants had ended in bringing them to a terrible, and, as the observers were confident, a merited fate.

Each was lashed to a mustang, their clothing torn from their bodies, their flesh bruised and cut; and the animals were being led down the barranca bed toward the river, the Apaches yelling like fiends.

Two-thirds of the Indians, however, returned to regain their dead, but they were fated to receive another surprise, most amazing and horrifying; for Ned Norris had ordered his men back before the savages had turned about, and had given his instructions, the mules being necked together.

The side of the barranca bed was quite steep, the only visible descent being by a narrow, winding path—the same of which the Indians had made use. Leaving their mustangs at the bed of the barran-

ca, the warriors sprung up this path, to regain their dead; but, as the line of braves gained a point half-way up to the level, down, one after another, with great velocity the Apache corpses were hurled, knocking the living braves like ten-pins, and causing howls of horror and dread.

No cessation was there, the gory slain flying downward, their set and glassy eyes and scalpless heads being terrible to contemplate; for the Texans had torn the reeking trophies from their victims!

Words cannot describe the horrible scene.

Suffice it to say that the living fled from the appalling sight, many of them being bruised, as they all rolled headlong down the steep, the howling warriors and the gory corpses together!

Springing upon their affrighted mustangs, which were held by their horrified comrades, all lashed their steeds down the barranca bed, as if the fiends of their traditions were in hot chase!

The Texans were masters of the situation.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE AVERTED DOOM.

WHEN Snap-Shot sprung upon his horse, as the teamsters, according to his orders, were securing the mules, preparatory to charging out on the plain to defend the wagons, he proceeded at once, as fast as the nature of the ground and the thickets would permit, up the river; for he had detected something which all other eyes had failed to see—namely, a shred of colored cloth from May's dress, which fluttered from a thorny bush.

Feeling positive that some of the savages had remained in their camp up the river, from which he had, a short time previous, rescued the maiden, and that they would now be on the alert; the scout did not believe that James and Monte could pass beyond the camp, with their captive, without being seen and taken by the Apaches.

In this event, May Montford would again be in the power of the Indians; but Snap-Shot felt assured that he could effect another rescue, for there could be but a small number of braves in the camp. But that which rendered him almost frantic, was the possibility that the miscreants would murder their beautiful captive at once, upon reaching a favorable point.

That James Montford was capable of any crime, the scout was confident.

The cool manner in which he had asserted to Monte his determination to murder May and Sidney, proved this.

Consequently, the young Texan was nearly beside himself with the most dreadful apprehension. For some time he went on, going more slowly and carefully after passing some distance; for he knew that the two villains were on foot, unacquainted with the timber, and liable to get astray, or turned about.

As time passed his agony of mind became almost insupportable, and the yells and whoops on the plain, betraying the fierce conflict between the Texans and the Apaches, were unheeded.

Finally, when perhaps half-way to the camp of the war-party, Snap-Shot heard a shriek of mortal terror.

He knew that it could come from no lips except those of the girl he so idolized, and he drove spurs deep, his noble bay dashing forward headlong, luckily as it afterward proved, along a narrow and clear space upon the soft bottom sward, which returned but a faint sound of the hoof-strokes.

The miscreants, he felt, were murdering May Montford!

He was too late—oh, God, too late!

So paralyzed was Sidney Staunton with the intensity of his emotions, that his limbs were almost rigid, and he no longer spurred as the shriek died away, and the weird echoes repeated the sound, softened like the weakened echoes of lost souls.

Yet onward dashed the gallant steed, as if he realized the importance of speed, and needed no spurs to urge him.

Suddenly, with a groan of anguish, Snap-Shot jerked the horse to a halt, his eyes nearly blinded by the bright moonlight which flooded a space in his front on the bank of the river; for within that space was a terrible scene—a scene that racked him to the very soul!

Secured to a small tree, which for some fifteen feet was devoid of branches, was May Montford, her arms bound back around the tree trunk, her face contorted in fear and horror, her eyes fixed as if fascinated, and gazing at a tree opposite her position.

Her long, disheveled hair hung in wild profusion about her sylph-like form, her clothing was torn and tattered, and her face pallid as that of a corpse.

Instinctively, as this view burst upon the scout, his eyes were drawn in the same direction as those of his darling—to the point from which he felt that some dread danger threatened—when, to his horror, he beheld a gigantic panther crouched upon a limb, its back already arched, its fur bristling, and its claws tearing the bark to get a firm clutch for the fatal bound upon its victim!

May Montford was so fascinated by horror, and her nearness to a terrible death, that she neither saw nor heard his approach.

Instantaneous was the scout's first movement.

Instantly he drove spurs, and jerked his bowie.

There was no time to shoot.

The life of May hung upon a hair!

The noble bay bounded forward, and by a dexterous use of the bridle-rein and spurs, he was brought to a position directly opposite May Montford, where, rearing upon his hind legs, the magnificent animal pawed the air, facing the terrible beast.

At that instant the panther shot through the air; but, in place of landing upon the young girl, it

struck full upon the breast and neck of the noble horse.

Snap-Shot, with a shout of commingled fury and joy was not disconcerted. Almost on the instant his bowie-blade was buried, buck-horn deep, in the savage brute's shoulder and heart. With a wild shriek the puma dropped to the ground, bearing the bowie with it, and as the maddened and lacerated horse came with its fore-feet and an almost human cry of rage down upon the quivering beast, the young scout bounded from the saddle.

What words could express the emotions of poor May Montford, as she beheld the well-known steed and rider appear, as if by magic, in her front, between her and death most terrible? The relief and joy were unspeakable.

But, as the panther shot through the air upon the steed and rider, and she saw the spurting blood in the moonlight, and the flash of steel—horse, man and monster, being in a whirl before her eyes—in her horrified state of mind, she thought the shriek of the panther was the last outcry of Sidney Staunton; and, with one gasp, she sunk forward, upheld to the waist by her bonds, her long wavy hair mingling with the glossy tail of the rearing horse!

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed the scout; "and you too, my faithful four-footed pard"—patting the torn and bleeding horse—"I'll prove, if you live—and so will May—the love we hold for you!"

"May darling—oh, Heaven! she has fainted, or this new horror has killed her!"

At once Snap-Shot released the maiden, and carried her down to the brink of the river; not forgetting to have his superb horse follow them. There, throwing water over May's face in profusion, low moans soon rewarded him; and, knowing his darling would recover, the scout placed her tenderly on the bank, and proceeded to examine the lacerated breast, neck, and legs of the horse. The animal, although still trembling, rubbed its muzzle over its master's head and shoulders; the young man speaking words of praise and affection, while the large and intelligent eyes of the horse glanced from him to the form of the beautiful maiden now lying outstretched on the sward, close at hand.

The reader can imagine how impressive was that tableau, which blessed the first gaze of May Montford, as she opened her eyes. The scene was just the opposite of the one she had last beheld.

Most terrible had been her experience, since her capture by the Apaches the previous evening; and now her one hope and prayer was that she might not again be torn away from the protection of Sidney Staunton.

That impressive tableau was indelibly imprinted upon the maiden's mind; never, until death, to be obliterated.

It was not in the nature of either the scout or the young girl to forget, in the happiness of their reunion, the noble horse that now stood looking at them with an expression that was almost human, as if craving their attention and sympathy.

Ever prepared for emergencies, Snap-Shot procured needles and silk from the pockets of his saddle-bags, as well as salve and spirits.

In a very short time the wounds of the horse were bathed, the same stitched, and salve applied, both our young friends being much relieved at finding that the panther had not inflicted any dangerous wound.

May quickly explained that the miscreants—her uncle and Monte—were binding her to the tree, when she had recovered from her faint upon being captured by them. She had no idea how far she had been conveyed by them.

The wretches had discovered the panther in the tree, and had decided to leave her to become the prey of the beast; thus relieving them of the necessity of taking her life with their own hands.

This they had tauntingly told her; explaining in triumph that they would soon be enjoying her father's wealth, and that they had perfected a plot to murder her lover, should he escape the Indians, for they knew that Snap-Shot would make it hot for them if allowed to live.

Her tears and pleadings had been of no avail, and fearing that the panther might be too precipitate, the cowardly villains had left the poor girl to her fate.

Hardly had May completed her story, when the most piercing shrieks came from the north, sounding strangely, and echoing through the natural arches.

"Come, darling," said Snap-Shot, "we are not yet free from danger, but to tell you the truth in regard to those sounds, and the exultant yells that followed, I believe that James Montford and Monte have at last reached the end of their rope. Justice has overtaken them, and they will be terribly punished for their crimes."

"May, the Apaches have captured those plotting scoundrels. But come—we must repair to a place of safety. If I mistake not, the boys have given the reds more than they expected."

May Montford shuddered at the fearful sounds, and clung to her lover, who now led his horse on the return.

"What a horrible fate!" she murmured. "The wages of sin is death," returned the scout, "though not usually such a death as your perfidious uncle and his villainous step-son are now, without doubt, doomed to suffer."

"Thank Heaven, my darling, I have you safe again, and you shall not again be torn from me, as long as life is given me."

Soon Snap-Shot reached a point in the bottom-land, east of the barranca; and the little party now walked from the shades into the bright moonlight, soon being discovered by the teamsters, who were just leaving the barranca, after having hurled all the dead braves down upon their living comrades.

Wild and joyous were the yells of welcome, given by Ned Norris and his men, as they galloped on their mules to meet them.

But there is little left for us to say.

The mules were driven to the wagons, and lariat to the tongues and wheels of the same; the wounded being attended to, with gentle solicitude, by May Montford herself. Ned, and those who were unhurt, remained on guard all night, but no Indians appeared.

The reason for this was, however, manifest to those versed in Apache character; and it was proved by the horrible shrieks that rent the night air from up the Rio Frio.

Well knew the Texans, that the savages were torturing James and Monte Montford; and all felt, after they had been informed of the treatment the Prairie Queen had received, that the wretches well deserved the fate, horrible as it must be—and which it was afterward known to have been; for, the scene of torture, upon being examined by Snap-Shot, two days after the Apaches had departed, revealed to the keen eyes of the scout, that the two miscreants had been stretched, head downward, between spreading saplings, that pulled their limbs apart. In this dreadful position, they had been scalped and scarified; and then actually roasted to death, by fires underneath!

These particulars, however, were never told to May Montford.

To her, it was horror enough, to have been even for a short time, a captive to the red fiends.

May's experiences, as the reader will doubtless admit, were calculated to satisfy her, in regard to the region of the Rio Frio; and she decided to locate on the Rio Medina, at a point where there was little danger to be apprehended from hostile hordes.

Ned, and all the teamsters, remained in her employ; as she erected quite extensive corrals, and improved the surroundings, after her own house had been built.

As may be supposed, Sidney Staunton, although loving May Montford with his whole heart and soul, felt that he could not marry her until he was in command of wealth himself; but it was not long before he was made aware of a legacy, which had been left him by an uncle of whom he had known but little personally. He was thus, without any sacrifice of self-respect, enabled to wed with the maiden, whom he had met in so strange a manner, and whose life had been on more occasions than one saved by him when she was literally in the embrace of death.

There is no more extensive or better appointed stock-range on the Rio Frio than that of Sidney and his wife, who, when the border became safe from Indian raids, located on the same land on which the wagon-train had halted, including the barranca, the Apache camp and the spot where the scout and his noble steed had arrived at so opportune a time to talk the panther.

And ever after, that magnificent bay, known as "Panther-Killer," was petted and cared for; even by the little ones that blessed the union of May Montford and Sidney Staunton, *alias*

Snap-Shot, the Boy Ranger.

THE END.

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